

A Thought on Parashat Vayeishev 'The Impact we can Make'

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



There is a word which, in recent years, has gained an enormous amount of currency in many professional fields: 'impact.' In the natural and social sciences and in the humanities, in farming, in business and in research, in education, in politics and in sport, in animal hunting and in space travel, the word 'impact' is employed in a myriad of contexts, usually with serious connotations and important implications in respect of the particular discipline. An authoritative definition of the word 'impact' is given as, "have a strong effect on someone or something." In the areas listed above, 'impact' is often defined, measured, recorded and communicated in terms of empirical and statistical data. However, *impact* may sometimes be far less suited to formal measuring, while still deeply significant.

A kind smile, full of empathy and warmth, can create a profound human connection, tear down emotional walls, even save a life. A simple act of kindness has the power to restore dignity, inspire faith, lift a spirit and raise a smile.

How conscious are we of our potential and our power to have a real impact on others, simply through the way that we speak and behave, the words that we say and the things that we do? How often do we *miss* an opportunity to make such an impact? How much does it cost, and how long does it take, to say 'good morning' to a person sweeping the pavement, or to call out 'thank you' as you jump off a bus? Next time you say, 'Good Shabbos,' give a broad smile and see what effect this has on the other person. Next time you see someone trimming their hedge or polishing their car, observe their pleasure in hearing you complement them on a great job.

Furthermore, do we realise that the impact of our words and actions can last for hours, days, weeks, perhaps months, years or even generations? Do not forget, too, that this is true of positive as well as negative words and actions. There is therefore a great responsibility upon us to speak and act with great care at all times, in order to ensure we maximise the good and minimise the harm that we may bring about.

In his 'Emet l'Yaakov,' Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky cites a fascinating midrash on Bereishit 37:21. Yoseif's brothers are plotting against him, but Reuven wants to interrupt their scheme. In the following pasuk, we learn of Reuven's desire to rescue Yoseif, and we see him articulate this forcefully: "וישמע" - "Reuven heard, and he rescued him from their hand; he said, "We will not strike him mortally!" The Yalkut Shimoni cites a midrash from Vayikra Rabbah:

The Torah has taught you Derech Eretz: when a person does a mitzvah he should do it with a joyful heart. For were Reuven to have known that הקב"ה would be writing, after his actions, "Reuven heard, and he rescued him from their hand," he would have carried him [Yoseif] on his shoulders and taken him to his father; were Aharon to have known that הקב"ה would be writing about him, "הנה הוא יצא לקראתך" - "behold, he is going out to meet you" (Shemot 4:14) (when ה' appointed Aharon as Moshe's spokesman before Paroh, at the burning bush) then he [Aharon] would have gone out to greet Moshe with drum and dance; were Boaz to have known that Hashem was going to write about him, "ויצבטלה קלי" - "he [Boaz] handed her [Rut] parched grain" (Rut 2:14) then he would have come to feed her with fattened calves. In the past, a person would do a mitzvah and the Nevi'im would write it down, but now that there are no Nevi'im, who will write it down? Eliyahu and Mashiach, and הקב"ה will seal it..."

The Emet l'Yaakov explains that Reuven, Aharon and Boaz did not realise that, at these particular moments, their actions were of great significance. Reuven believed he was simply rescuing his brother; in fact, had he taken Yoseif to their father he would have saved the Jewish People from the גלות מצרים - the Egyptian Exile. The episode of Moshe at the burning bush, and Aharon's appointment as his spokesman before Paroh, was of enormous importance, since the very Giving of the Torah was dependent on יציאת מצרים - the Exodus from Egypt. The exchanges between Boaz and Rut would ultimately lead to the birth of David HaMelech and, later, Mashiach. However, at the time that these events occurred, the (great) people involved had no idea of the magnitude of the potential impact of their actions.

Moreover, writes Rabbi Kamenetzky, "it is more correct to say that they did not realise that their performing of these actions would become Torah, and that the Torah and the Nevi'im would immortalise their actions for all future generations." Reb Yaakov adds that, were they to have known that these matters were of historic import, our great forebears would have internalised that and so responded accordingly in these situations. A note on the Emet l'Yaakov emphasises that their actions would not, הם ושלום, have been motivated by כבוד - the prospect of gaining honour.

Rav Yaakov goes on to explain that הז"ל, our Sages, did not want people to erroneously imagine that, since the Torah is finished and sealed, there is no longer any significance to our actions. Rather, this is not the case, and they taught that every good deed performed by a Jewish person contributes to the formation of the future of the Jewish People, even to the extent that our deeds are noted down by Eliyahu HaNavi and Mashiach, and signed and sealed by הקב"ה, Himself.

If we genuinely believe that our actions can have a lasting impact, then surely we will make a greater effort to ensure our behaviour meets the highest Torah standards and reflects and projects the finest Torah values.

But more than that, what a great responsibility it is if, indeed, our own actions are contributing to the continued 'writing' of the Torah, itself. In what sense can this be true? What kind of Torah is being written in the pages of our own lives? Perhaps it is the continued Torah of סימן לבנים, except that in this scenario the אבות become the בנים. We are first the children who follow the example set by

our Forefathers and Mothers, then we become the fathers and mothers to our own children, enabling that same example to flow on through the next generations. This is the impact we can make.



Wishing everyone much ברכה and הצלחה,

Jeremy