

The Most Festive Fast
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky
VaYishlach 5776

In a world that seems to descend further into madness, at a time when the news out of Israel- and for the Jewish people in general- is rarely ever positive, and after two weeks of really intense sermons, I think we all need to talk about something happy and positive instead. Sara Techia and Ariel Biegel certainly felt the same way. As you know, Sara Techiya is the daughter of Rav Yaakov Littman and the sister of Netanel Littman, the father and son who were gunned down on the way to the aufruf of her *chassan*, Ariel Biegel, the son of the Rabbi of the *yishuv* Meitar. In the midst of shiva, the most intense mourning for her father who would never walk her down the aisle or bless her before she wed her beloved, Sara Techiya and Ariel announced that they would not let the terrorists destroy their simcha. Instead, they would invite the entire Jewish people to their wedding, a joyous and defiant celebration of life in the face of tormentors who worship death. Nothing could stop the establishment of a new *bayis ne'eman beyisrael*, a new Jewish home. Their spirit was infectious; people came from all over Israel to participate in the joyous event, which was moved to Binyanei Haumah, the Jerusalem Convention Center, to accomodate the anticipated crowds. And crowds there were- 10,000 people showed up. The administrative director of the Binyani HaUma had to announce that anyone who had already danced had to leave, so that other people could come in! And those 10,000 people were not just Israelis: they were joined by Rabbis and lay people from all over the world as well. Several Chabad Houses in England,

America and Australia held raffles, the prize of which was one ticket to represent the community, with leftover funds being dedicated to help the young couple begin their home together. My friend and colleague Rabbi Mark Fishman of Montreal concluded his sermon last week by announcing that he had already purchased a ticket to fly to the wedding, and he asked who else would join him. Within several hours after Shabbos, 11 people told him they were joining, among them a grandfather, son and grandson, and an entire family that paid for the trip with funds they had originally aside to refurbish their basement. Many thousands of others watched the wedding in live stream. Weddings carry with them a sense of joy and optimism, even if they are conducted under extremely bittersweet circumstances. But despite the joyousness of the occasion, there is a serious aspect to a Jewish wedding. The Rema (Even HaEzer 61:1) writes that it is customary for the groom and bride to fast on the day of their wedding, a nearly ubiquitous practice in the Ashkenazic community and not widely practiced by our Sephardic brethren. So momentous and solemn is this day for us that, if a couple gets married late enough in the afternoon or after nightfall, the Mincha they each pray prior to the Chuppah is identical to that of Erev Yom Kippur, including *viduy*. There are numerous reasons advanced for this custom, some with halachic ramifications. According to Rabbi Yehuda Mintz of Padua (1405-1508), one of the great Rabbinic leaders of Italian Jewry during his time, one of the reasons for this practice is that the day of one's wedding is a time for atonement, and in the same way we fast on Yom Kippur, we fast on our own personal Yom Kippur. I think many of us have heard this in

some for or other, but have you ever wondered about the source for this practice? It's related to this week's Parsha, and it originates from an unlikely source.

The Torah tells us that after taking for himself several wives from Canaan against his parents' wishes, Esav took an additional wife, this time pleasing to his parents. It was his first cousin, the daughter of his uncle Yishmael, referred to in this week's Parsha by the name *Bosmat*.

בראשית פרק לו פסוק ג

ואת בשמת בת ישמעאל אחות נביות:

Earlier on, however, the same woman is described by a different name.

בראשית פרק כח פסוק ט

וילך עשו אל ישמעאל ויקח את מחלת בת ישמעאל בן אברהם אחות נביות על נשיו לו לאשה

In one instance, she is known as בשמת, and in another as מחלת. So which one was her real name? Rashi explains that she was known by both, but the name *machalat* was a descriptor. Rashi paraphrases the Medrash Sefer Shmuel, and tells us why:

רש"י בראשית פרק לו פסוק ג

ולהלן קורא לה (כח ט) מחלת. מצינו באגדת מדרש ספר שמואל (פרק יז) שלשה מוחלין להן עונותיהם גר שנתגייר, והעולה לגדולה, והנושא אשה, ולמד הטעם מכאן, לכך נקראת מחלת שנמחלו עונותיה:

The Medrash includes people getting married among the three categories of people whose sins are forgiven immediately- people who are turning over radically new chapters in their lives and reinventing themselves, the other two being converts and people who attain positions of communal or professional prominence. Esav's wife was

referred to as מחלת from the word מחילה, or forgiveness, because of what happens to a person who weds. I ask you: This is such a beautiful lesson, one that speaks to the very essence of what marriage is about. Why do we learn it from someone who is viewed by our sages as a profligate sinner, a promiscuous wastrel who cared not at all for sanctity and commitment? There are plenty of other people who got married in the Torah!

An answer might be found not as much in what Esav *did*, but rather in what he *didn't* do. There is no doubt that Esav harbored a murderous rage against his brother for years. It's the source of the famous Rabbinic joke a very prominent Rabbi once told me:

Q. How do we know Esav was actually a Chassidishe Rebbe?

A. He wore a fur coat, traveled with an entourage and wanted to kill his brother.

He probably spent an inordinate amount of time figuring out how to hasten his demise, turning his parents into mourners once again. It was this fear of a murderous brother that motivated Yaakov's actions throughout the beginning of our Parsha, as he prepared for their fateful denouement. Per Rashi, Splitting his family into two so they could not all be murdered at once, preparing for battle and praying to God for deliverance- these are all the methods Yaakov employed to protect himself against his brother's fury. And yet, when they finally meet, what happens? Yaakov presents Esav with abundant gifts, and Esav insists that he already has plenty, thank you very much. Yaakov insists:

(יא) קחנָא אֶת־בְּרִכְתִּי אֲשֶׁר הִבָּאת לךָ כִּי־חַנְנִי אֱלֹהִים וְכִי יֵשׁ־לִי־כֹל וַיִּפְצַר־בוּ וַיִּקְח׃

Each one of them introduces the other to their families, and exchanges gifts- or at least tries to; Yaakov refuses Esav's offer to leave some of his entourage behind. Esav

returns to *Se'ir*, and Yaakov continues on his journey toward Sukkot- and that's it. Can you imagine? Esav had a golden opportunity to finally exact retribution against the conniving, deceitful person who stole the blessings from their beloved father, and now was parading those blessings in his face, but he didn't do it. Instead, they hugged and parted company, maybe not as the closest of friends but certainly not as mortal enemies. What happened? Was Esav a different person? Not likely, but in this instance, he let go of his worst impulses and basest emotions. No longer was Yaakov's success a source of intense pain for his brother; instead, it was something he learned to live with. This might be the reason Esav is a paradigm for the forgiveness of sin- because even an avaricious, promiscuous hedonist like him was able to set aside, even if only temporarily, the most painful of grievances and overcome his basest impulses, to the degree that he might even have felt some happiness for his brother. As a couple begins their journey together, their sins are forgiven and they begin with a clean slate. Through the atonement of their sins, they are challenged to learn the lesson of the clean slate they've been granted, and apply it in their lives. As they start anew, they are challenged not to look outward at the finances, possessions and marriages of others, but rather, to look inward and strengthen the foundation they have together.

I think this lesson is a critical one, especially on Thanksgiving weekend. As families across the nation get together and experience the myriad stresses of a close weekend gathering, one of the main sources of tension is that as much as we pay lip service to counting our blessings, we often find it extremely difficult to deal with the blessings of

others that are often rubbed in our faces; it's the cousin who makes more money, the married sister, the brother with the perfect children or the childhood friend home for Thanksgiving who seems to be on one fabulous trip after another-and on and on. In our communities, it's true as much on Rosh Hashanah and Pesach as it is on Thanksgiving. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle recounted how he was once at a dinner party with Oscar Wilde, who told the following when after talk had turned to the way in which the fortune of our friends makes us discontented.

*'The devil,' said Wilde, 'was once crossing the Libyan Desert, and he came upon a spot where a number of small fiends were tormenting a holy hermit. The sainted man easily shook off their evil suggestions. The devil watched their failure and then he stepped forward to give them a lesson. "What you do is too crude," said he. "Permit me for one moment." With that he whispered to the holy man, "Your brother has just been made Bishop of Alexandria." A scowl of malignant jealousy at once clouded the serene face of the hermit. "That," said the devil to his imps, "is the sort of thing which I should recommend.'*¹

There is a very important Yiddish verb for the character trait it takes to navigate these situations. The verb is to *fargin*; tellingly, there is no single word in the English language for it, because it really is not an emotion that is a value in English speaking countries. To *fargin* means to be happy for others without envy, or alternatively, the ability to allow others to enjoy happiness in their own lives unburdened by guilt over our envy. Being able to *fargin* is critical to our mental health and social functioning, for several reasons. First of all, there will

¹ <http://interestingliterature.com/2013/10/16/the-best-anecdotes-about-oscar-wilde/>

always be people in our lives who are happy and successful, and seemingly more so than we are.

Second, if we can't *fargin* others, others will have a difficult time *fargining* us. Imagine being unable to share any *simcha* with anyone for fear that they will hate you for it or that you will be consumed by jealousy. Being unable to share joy and happiness with others – and sometimes even the stress that goes with that joy and happiness- is a lonely, isolating experience.

As we celebrate with this young couple, we pray that HKB”H continue to bestow joy and happiness upon his people, and that we continue to celebrate *smachos* together. And let us all learn the lesson of Esav as the source for the forgiveness of a bride and groom as they start their new, forgiven lives. If we are able to to forgive and especially to *fargin*, turning inward, our lives will truly be all the richer.