

The old cliché “what goes around comes around” is one of the themes pervading the story of our patriarchs and matriarchs, and nowhere is it more apparent than in our parashah. Jakob’s wiliness, which involves much bending of the truth to serve his purposes, has been matched in kind by that of his uncle Laban and continues to impact him through the actions of his sons. And although his parents’ favoritism deeply affected him and his entire family, he perpetuates this unhealthy pattern with the sons of his beloved Rachel, especially with Joseph. How easy it is to establish a behavioral pattern, and how difficult to break it! But as we all know, our actions have far-reaching consequences, some of which may affect us in like form. Midrash Tanchuma Vayeshev 7 gives us three salient examples, all of which originate in speech. Citing Proverbs 18:21, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue; and they that indulge it shall eat the fruit thereof,” the midrash teaches, “All of the trials that befell Joseph occurred because of the evil he spoke against his brothers, as it is said: And Joseph brought evil report of them to his father. ... ‘They treat the children of Bilhah and Zilpah as though they were servants ... but I act toward them as a brother.’ ... The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, ‘Be assured you will be punished with the very word you have spoken ...’ ... ‘My brothers eat the limbs of living animals.’ However, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, ‘Even in the hour of their deepest degradation, they will not do that. They will slaughter their animals according to the rules of ritual slaughter, ...’ ‘They looked covetously at the native woman.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, said, ‘Be assured you will suffer from this very thing. Your master’s wife will look covetously at you. ...’” Indeed, Joseph is sold as a servant; a goat is slaughtered and his fancy coat is dipped into its blood as evidence of his demise; and the unrequited desires of his master Potiphar’s wife land him in prison. Joseph’s *lashon hara* is the first of only two instances in the Torah, the other being Miriam’s disparaging remark about Moses’ wife, and both are punished with a form of isolation that gives them time to reflect on their actions. Arrogant speech also leads to discord. In his youthful naiveté and obliviousness to his favored status, Joseph cannot help but appear arrogant to his brothers as he recounts his dreams. Even Jakob is alarmed and tries to defuse the situation with a bit of sarcasm: “Will we come, I, your mother, and your brothers to prostrate ourselves to you to the ground?” (36:10). Rashi notes that although he might have meant Bilhah, who had raised Joseph, his statement actually means that because Rachel is dead, the entire dream is meaningless. However, in a long discussion about dreams, the rabbis of the Talmud agree that “Even a dream that will be fulfilled in the future contains some element of nonsense.” (Berakhot 55a) Jakob’s attempt to placate his other sons is too little, too late. Judah too, who advises his brothers to sell Joseph rather than kill him, must bear the consequences of his actions. Chapter 38 interrupts the Joseph narrative with the story of Judah and Tamar. Having been demoted by his brothers, Judah turns away, marries an Adullamite woman, has three sons with her, and takes Tamar as a wife for his eldest son. Citing Midrash Tanchuma Buber Vayeshev 8, Rashi justifies the interruption: “... Judah’s brothers demoted him from his high position when they saw their father’s distress. They said: ‘You told us to sell him. Had you told us to return him, we would have obeyed you.’” Midrash Bereshit Rabbah explains: “Hashem said to Judah: ‘You said to your father, ‘do you recognize it? [Joseph’s coat]’ I swear that Tamar will say about you, ‘do you recognize it. [his pledge for payment for her services]’” Judah understands and acts honorably toward Tamar, earning the kingship for himself and his descendants. Joseph learns too, but only after a series of harrowing experiences. Midrashim portray him as a vain and supercilious youth who takes his successes for granted. Tanchuma paints a particularly negative picture: At the beginning of his tenure in Potiphar’s house, Joseph prayed to “find grace, kindness, and mercy in Your sight, and in the sight of all who see me, and in the eyes of my master Potiphar.” Once Potiphar entrusts him with the keys of his household, Joseph, realizing his own importance, “began to eat, drink, and curl his hair, saying: ‘Blessed be the Omnipotent One who has caused me to forget my father’s house.’ Whereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, rebuked him, saying: ‘Your father mourns for you in sackcloth and ashes, but you eat and drink and curl your hair; therefore, your mistress will impose herself on you and will torment you.’” When Jakob sends Joseph to check on his brothers, he initiates a chain of events that will finally put an end to the unhealthy patterns that had afflicted the patriarchal families from the outset. But they all will have to endure much more suffering in the process. Both Abraham and Yitzchak engaged in the wife-as-sisters ruse, and both favored one son over the other. Jakob, who participated in deceiving Yitzchak with goatskins, is deceived by his sons with the blood of a goat. Judah, who deceived his father with the blood of a goat, is deceived by Tamar with a goat kid. Joseph, whose insensitive words provoked so much hatred in his brothers, is sent to prison by the words of Potiphar’s lovesick wife. Then, while in prison, he trusts Pharaoh’s imprisoned butler to remember him rather than trusting HaShem, which keeps him there for another two years. Indeed, what goes around comes around. But honest self-evaluation followed by sincere repentance can break unhealthy cycles and lead to positive change. Often it involves much suffering, but sometimes all we need is time to reflect.

Shabbat shalom!