



MACHSHAVOT

Parashat Vayeitzei

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Making it Last

Rabbi Andrew Shaw
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When the first lockdown began back in March, I decided, as well as spending more time on the important things in life such as family time and learning, I would also find time to relax and unwind. Therefore, I decided to pick a TV show on Netflix or Prime to watch.

I did not realise the show I selected would have such an impact.

It is a comedy, but when I finally finished the ninth season (yes I watched almost 200 twenty minute episodes over 8 months!) something struck me which I think solidified an idea I have had about the optimum way to inspire young Jewish people.

Let me explain:

The series, for those who haven't watched it, is called 'The Office' and it is a mockumentary about people in an office in Scranton, Pennsylvania. We really get to know them, and connect to them. It is testimony to the series that most of the main cast were together for the vast majority of the episodes. We see them getting married, having kids, having problems, their ups and downs etc.

The final episode has them eventually all sitting in the office after a wedding reception. It is a very poignant scene when you realise how much they all mean to each other – and to the viewer as well.

It was then that it hit me.

In 2000 I was appointed the Assistant Rabbi of Stanmore Synagogue. I was informed that my major responsibility was the engagement of the youth. When I began, pretty much the only youth involved post bar and bat mitzvah were the religious youth. Over the next few years we (the wonderful youth team I worked with) put together a strategy to engage a much higher percentage of youth by introducing a slew of programming at the younger ages to create connections between the youth and each other as well as with the staff. This could include trips, plays, clubs and eventually European Tours, visits to Israel, Prague and Poland.

The results of the strategy were phenomenal, over 75% of youth stayed involved and it revolutionised the community.

The strategy began with year 5, and for the next nine years we worked with the kids, got to know them and formed very strong connections – which thank God have lasted until today.

In July 2009 our first year group 'graduated'. We decided therefore to have a graduation weekend and to invite the year group to spend a Shabbat away at Birmingham Hillel House.

For the next six years, we hosted each year group that we had known since they were nine years old. Each year, different leaders came with me, leaders who had had a special connection to the specific year group and some leaders who always came every year.

Those Shabbatot were some of the most special I have spent as an educator.

To sit with students who you have known for nine years, whose bar and bat mitzvah's you have been at, who you have been on Jewish journeys around the world – you have a very strong Keshet – connection to them and them to you.

Every year they came, approx. 20 each year – that was 60% of the year group, the vast majority not from religious homes – but they came because of the *kesharim* with each other and the *kesharim* with us.

We would sit and chat during Shabbat and reminisce of the journey we had together over the years.

I thought of those Shabbatot when I watched the finale of 'The Office'.

It was similar – the connection of the group to each other and to the leaders in the office.

I believe that imparting Judaism to young people needs experiences, not just education and needs *kesharim* with leaders but most importantly needs time.

Yaakov was given this idea in this week's parsha.

As he flees from Esav, he is not sure what to expect. Was he correct in his encounter with his father? When will he see his parents again? What does Hashem think of his actions?

We all know the story, he sleeps and has the vision of the ladder. The ladder of course was used to show the angels going up and down. However, they could have just moved up and down, why the need for a ladder?

Rav Dessler speaks about how we can learn from the ladder, that true growth is acquired step by step that you cannot jump any part of the way. Similarly, when it comes to Jewish observance, it is not healthy, particularly wise or ultimately successful to go from zero or little observance to full observance in a short time. Like the ladder we should gradually take on more and more – so the growth may be gradual, but it will last.

My experiences in Stanmore – with both parents and youth, was that growth happened not over a weekend or even a year, but over a number of years, gradually building on the previous experiences to cement the growth.

Our love and concern for the characters of 'The Office' came from the time we had 'spent' with them. And the care and love they had for each other was because of the 'years' they had worked together. Yes, it is only a TV show, so *kal v'chomer* – how much more so – when it is actual relationships based over a number of years.

Any meaningful educational experience needs to have at the heart of it:

- a) Building of *kesharim* between students and leaders with immersive experiences
- b) a group experience
- c) over a number of years

As I quoted recently, the [JPR study in 2014 – ‘Strengthening Jewish Identity: What works?’](#), came to a similar conclusion that there needs to be ‘three critical factors: Jewish immersion, group experience, and duration’.

That is why a year in Yeshiva and Sem is so powerful – the relationships with your teachers through experiences and education, a group experience, which is for a year or two.

Of course, that is also the reason why Bnei Akiva has had and still has such an impact on thousands of young people. I had my *Shevet*, my year group, who I was with for *machanot* and other programmes for a number of years with similar *madrichim* - once again immersive experiences and education, a group experience, over a number of years.

As I mentioned two weeks ago, we are hoping to launch a major initiative in the summer to create leadership – it also will be employing these same three concepts to hopefully have a major impact on the community.

So ‘The Office’ has finished – and hopefully lockdown will soon end as well – but the lessons from ‘The Office’ go far beyond a mockumentary, to the heart of truly lasting Jewish experiences.

Shabbat Shalom

P.s. See you tomorrow night at the [quiz!](#)

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THE GREAT SHABBATON QUIZ

As promised – the quiz is back!

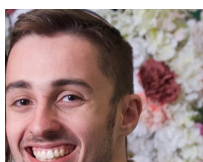
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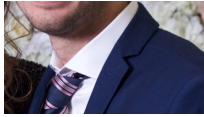
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The Right Way to Rebuke

Luis Herszaft

Participant on the Mizrachi UK Fellowship Programme



No one likes to be told they are wrong or they are acting inappropriately, however, there are times where rebuke is necessary- as the Torah tells us 'thou shalt certainly rebuke thy neighbour' (Vayikra 19:17) and we can learn from this week's Parasha the way to and perhaps even more importantly, the way not to rebuke others.

Yaacov works for seven years in order to marry Rachel, the wedding day comes and Yaacov discovers he has been tricked by Lavan into marrying Leah. Yaacov asks Lavan "What is this you have done to me? I was in your service for Rachel! Why did you deceive me?", to which Lavan responds "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older" (Bereshit 29:25-26). At a first glance Lavan's response seems innocent, however, Beis Halevi explains the language used by Lavan was actually a subtle insult. Lavan was really saying "In *our* place the older marries before the younger! We are not like you who took the firstborn from your brother Eisav". Lavan used this sly sarcastic comment as an insult towards Yaacov. If Lavan wanted to rebuke Yaacov for the way he acted, he didn't need to use sarcasm.

Yaacov's rebuke to the shepherds is entirely different. Rav Yaacov Kaminetzky asks, why does Yaacov refer to the shepherds as *achai, my brothers*. These were seemingly people he had never met before and was using a term normally reserved for family or close friends! Rav Kaminetzky explains Yaacov arrived at the well and saw that the shepherds were not working. Rashi explains that Yaacov was rebuking the shepherds for stopping their work since they were employed by others. Since Yaacov was rebuking them, he decided to first use a term which would create a connection and a relationship between them. This is the correct and most effective way to rebuke others- as Rambam explains '... he shall speak to him calmly, employing soft language, telling him that he does not speak of it to him, save for his own good, to bring him to a life in the world to come' (Hilchot Deot 6:7).



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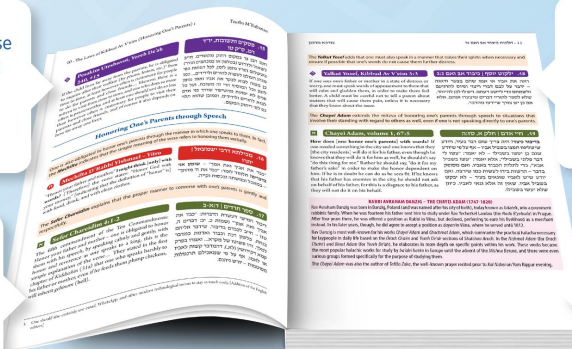
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