

“Speak For Peace”
Rabbi Yaakov Menken

“And [Yosef’s] brothers saw that their father loved him more than all the brothers, and they hated him, and they could not speak to him peacefully.” [37:4]

How could this be? These are the sons of Yaakov, the forefathers of our people, and apparently they were so filled with hate that they couldn't look him in the face!

This is simply an erroneous reading. They "hated" him because they thought Yosef was trying to displace them all. He had accused them of misbehavior to their father, when they thought their behavior was appropriate. Thus it was he who was offending them, they believed, and they believed their hatred was appropriate. They were mistaken. But the verse is not claiming that they were so angry that they could not look him in the eye -- that would never be acceptable. The word for hate in Hebrew is simply not as intense as it is in English, much the same as its opposite, "Ahavah", can be translated like or love depending upon context.

Both Rashi and Rabbeinu Bechayah comment that the fact that they could not speak to him peacefully was actually evidence of a praiseworthy attribute. Rashi explains, "from their disgrace we learn their praise, that they would not say one thing with their mouths and another in their hearts."

They were not liars. They would not pretend to love him as a brother, maintaining a facade. Such "diplomacy" was foreign to them. To create a plastic face, to act like you love someone while inwardly disliking him or her -- is a terrible trait. It is lying on a very personal level, and when the truth comes out the feelings of betrayal and hatred are justifiably intense.

Such people render themselves untrustworthy. Their expressions of love have no meaning, since they are given without feeling. To say "one thing in the mouth and another in the heart" proves to be destructive to no one more than the actor.

Of course, there is something better -- don't hate. And in the brothers' behavior, we see the method to overcome it. The verse testifies that "they could not speak to him" l'shalom, to peace. To create peace.

The Alshich analyzes the verse, "And G-d turned away from the evil which he had spoken to do to his people." [Exodus 32:14] Given that the Torah permits us to derive anthropomorphic lessons from G-d's "behavior", we see that the turning away follows the speech. By way of his words of rebuke and anger, the anger itself subsided. And this, says the Alshich, is the lesson here as well: "and they could not speak to him" -- they could not rebuke him and change his behavior, even with strong words. Had they poured out their anger with words, it would have left their hearts -- and brought them to peace.

There is a valuable lesson here, not only for potential speakers, but for potential listeners. Sometimes letting a person chew you out, letting them spill their anger, is very worthwhile. How often, especially when a person remains silent, does the accuser come over afterwards to apologize for being too harsh, or at least express embarrassment by being kind? When criticism is expressed rather than left to simmer, the result can be peace -- a greater and truer peace than were everything left unsaid.

Obviously the ideal is to see the good in others and excise bad feelings entirely. But if something is bothering you too much, it is inappropriate, even evil, to lie and hide it. Sometimes the truth, once expressed, dissipates -- and that should be the goal.

May we always speak "l'shalom" -- to bring peace.