

Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 27

“Like a man who betrays the wife of his youth” – Unpacking Rashi’s shocking explanation of “bagad”

By Rabbi Yehoshua Berman

“Like a man who cheats on the wife of his youth.” That is the shocking analogy that Rashi implements to explain how Leah apparently felt about Yaakov being together with her maidservant Zilpah.



It’s in reference to the cryptic word bagad (בגד). Although read as two distinct words, ba gad (בא גא) which means that good fortune has arrived; the fact that it is written as one word which means betrayed is conveying an additional layer of meaning.

And that additional layer of meaning, says Rashi, is that Leah was as though conveying, “You betrayed me by being together with my maidservant”.

This explanation seems utterly confounding. After all, it was none other than Leah herself who took Zilpah and gave her to Yaakov for the express purpose of bringing more children into the world. How, then, are we to make sense of Leah apparently lobbing an accusation of betrayal at Yaakov?!

And, if you carry this explanation through to its logical conclusion, it apparently wasn’t a mere fleeting thought. The pasuk reads, “Leah said ‘bagad’ and she called his name Gad”. It

follows then that “bagad” implies “you betrayed me” that the name Gad constitutes a lasting allusion for this additional layer of meaning.

Yet, Yaakov did not change the name or in any way contest it.

Furthermore, if Leah felt betrayed by the act, why did she allow it to continue? She kept Zilpah together with Yaakov for yet another son to be born!

I believe that answering this question reveals a fundamental rule of the human condition and provides an exceptionally helpful insight into negotiating interpersonal relationships, particularly in the marriage context.

Feelings don’t have to make sense.

Emotions are not necessarily based on purely rational thinking. They can simply be a function of how the experience feels, irrespective of what logical analysis may indicate thereabout.

Yes, it was Leah herself who specifically wanted and initiated Yaakov being together with Zilpah. But that doesn’t change the fact that it stings. Her husband is engaging in sexual intimacy with another woman. It hurts.

She *feels* betrayed.

She was not betrayed. But she feels betrayed.

That is simply the reality of how it feels to her. Obviously, Leah wasn’t actually accusing Yaakov of betrayal. But she was sharing that that is how it felt!

And how did Yaakov react to the “accusation”? As far as we know, he didn’t. He just heard her out.

Granted, this assertion leans a bit towards conjecture as we need to deduce from what was *not* said instead of what was said. Nevertheless, the rule of thumb is “shtikah k’hodaah”, so the

straightforward understanding is that Yaakov heard Leah out, and that was that. Even to the extent of allowing the name Gad – an allusion to “bagad” – to stand.

What we see, then, is that Yaakov let it be.

He allowed space for Leah’s feelings about the matter.

Feelings that trigger pain can be difficult to deal with. Sometimes excruciating. Individuals have a hard enough time dealing with their own painful feelings; they may not be inclined to allowing space for other people’s painful feelings.

“Don’t be scared; there’s nothing to be scared about.”

“Why are you angry?! You’re just overreacting!”

“What is the point of getting hurt over something so silly?!”

“But you are the one who said...?!!!”

There are a million and one ways that we push away others’ painful feelings. And for good reason; it’s tough! It’s painful!

We’ve got our own internal pain to deal with so we may have this knee-jerk reaction, “Now don’t you go and try to make me take on even more!”

It would seem, though, that a big part of what underlies this drive to dismiss (kind of “wish away”) others’ painful feelings is the fear of becoming overburdened.

“I just cannot handle it. It’s too much...”

But the thing is, you don’t really have to “handle” it, do you? If you cannot fix it – and very often, you cannot – then you don’t have to and nobody is asking you to.

But you can allow space for it.

You can listen. Literally, just hear the words.

Simply allow the person to share what he or she is feeling without any angle whatsoever other than that simple act of sharing. And, if you want, you can even respond with some words of affirmation or reassurance.

“You feel scared? I understand. I also get scared sometimes.”

“I see that what happened is extremely upsetting to you. Thank you for letting me know how you feel about it.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize that this was going to be such a big sacrifice for you...”

Leah was not accusing Yaakov of betrayal. But she did want to share with him that that is how it felt for her.

Yaakov did not try to shut her down. He didn’t dismiss or invalidate the feeling. On the contrary, he allowed space for it.

He listened. He allowed her to share.

Resonates? Allow others to also feel the resonance and pass this on to them now. They need to hear this; be the one to give it to them!



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