Jewish Tribune – Vayeitzei

**Enough About Me**

The title of Dale Carnegie’s famous book “How to win friends and influence people” has always bothered me. But it didn’t seem to bother the more than 30 million people who bought it, making it one of [the best-selling books of all tim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_books)e.

One of the surprising and counter-intuitive secrets of the book involves how to be a good conversationalist. Amazingly, the secret has more to do with listening than talking.

Try it. Next time you are at a chasuna, ask your neighbour about something that interests them. It could be their work, their hobbies, their Torah musings or their political views. And just listen. But really listen. After the conversation, your friend will think you are a good conversationalist despite the fact you hardly said a word.

This does come with a warning. A friend once told me about a conversation he had with another person. My friend asked this person about his children. Now there’s a topic people can speak for a long time about. One by one, he went through each child and what they were up to.

And before my friend could respond, the person said: “Enough about me and my children, let me tell you about my grandchildren!”

Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less. This line has been attributed to many a person, but I think it has resonance in this week’s sedrah.

The sedra begins with Yaakov Ovinu’s famous dream of the angels going up and down the ladder. The possuk says:

וַיִּיקַץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְּׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן יֵשׁ ה' בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה, וְאָנֹכִי לֹא יָדָעְתִּי

And Yaakov woke up from his sleep and said: ”Indeed, Hashem is in this place and I did not know.”

The Tiferes Shlomo offers a classic Chassidic insight. He interprets the possuk as follows: If HKBH’s Shechina is indeed in this place, it is because אָנֹכִי לֹא יָדָעְתִּי, I thought of myself less.

Not less of myself but I thought of myself less, I was not so self-absorbed and self-centred.

This theme is reiterated in Mizmor L’Sodah that we say in Shacharis every morning.

מִזְמוֹר לְתוֹדָה ... עִבְדוּ אֶת ה' בְּשִֹמְחָה. בֹּאוּ לְפָנָיו בִּרְנָנָה

דְּעוּ כִּי ה' הוּא אֱלֹקִים. הוּא עָשָֹנוּ. וְלוֹ (כתיב ולא) אֲנַחְנוּ עַמּוֹ וְצֹאן מַרְעִיתוֹ

A song of thanksgiving… Serve Hashem with joy, come before Him with praise

Know that Hashem is G-d, He made us and we are His, His people and the flock of His pasture.

You will notice there is a “kri u’ksiv”. The word וְלוֹ is said but actually ולא is written.

I once heard, a beautiful insight, I think in the name of the Gerrer Rebbe. How do we become His and His people? The answer is ולא אֲנַחְנוּ, and not us. Negate the self. The more we take ourselves out of the picture and are less self-focused, the more we become attached to HKBH.

So that is Yaakov Ovinu’s secret. To find Hashem and draw the Shechina into our homes and lives, it is אָנֹכִי לֹא יָדָעְתִּי, I thought of myself less.

The following is not a Chazal (so far as I know), but a wise saying nonetheless, When a child is born, it emerges into this world with its fists clenched. Fast forward one hundred and twenty years, one of the things the chevra kaddisha do when preparing the body for burial is to open the palms. This creates a powerful symbolism. Life is about the transition of clenched fists to an open palm. The journey of giving and becoming more outward focused.

That is why chesed and volunteering is so important. Today’s youth are known as the “iGeneration”. Isolated by technology, they are spending less time interacting in person. In her famous book “iGen”, Jean Twenge concludes that this is what leads many youngsters to experience higher levels of anxiety, depression and loneliness.

In my interaction with today’s youth, I am often overwhelmed with amazement and admiration for their volunteering and chesed. That is a powerful antidote to the “iGeneration”. The numbers involved in KEF, Shabbat Walk, GIFT and so many other worthy organisations are quite simply breathtaking. And there are sometimes waiting lists for the volunteers to join and spend their summers in this way!

Of course, volunteering is an invaluable help to the recipient. To the KEF kid whose life is so much brighter and to their parents who can have some much-needed respite and pleasure knowing their children are so well cared for. But the biggest beneficiaries are the volunteers themselves. They become bigger and better people and are involved in activities that help in the lifelong journey of opening their clenched fists to fully open palms.

That is the lesson of אָנֹכִי לֹא יָדָעְתִּי, and Yaakov Ovinu’s secret to bring HKBH into our lives.

**Rabbi Jeremy Golker is the** **Menahel of Hasmonean Boys School and Hasmonean Girls School. To listen to his shiurim, go to TorahAnytime.com or JewishPodcasts.Org**