

The beginning of Parshas Vayishlach concerns the story of Yaakov's encounter with Eisav. Aside from the other details of Yaakov's preparations for this fateful meeting, the Torah tells us much about the way Yaakov communicated to Eisav. And one of the most obvious features of the story is how obsequious and subservient Yaakov is towards Eisav, bordering on the extreme. He calls Eisav his master over and over again, he bows down to him seven times and he has his whole family bow as well. You might say that it was all in the service of flattery and the hopes of softening Eisav, but this seems to be more than a little over the top, like pouring the entire contents of the sugar bowl into your tea instead of one scoop. Rashi, in fact, teaches us that Yaakov's strategy worked: moved by Yaakov's prostrations and display of respect, Eisav ran towards Yaakov and hugged him and kissed in some kind of genuine affection.

It is possible that Eisav was so self-centered that seeing Yaakov bowing to him stroked his egotistical soul. But it seems that Yaakov was sending a different message. He was taking Eisav back to the most basic element of our relationships with each other: kindness.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner, whose 40th yahrtzeit is on Sunday, 20 Kislev, taught us that while we know that there are many qualities with which Hashem relates to the world -- judgment, glory, etc. -- one quality comes before all the rest. עולם הסד יבנה, the world is built on kindness. Hashem wants to shower us with kindness, and He continues to guide our lives with kindness. There are many other elements of guiding the world which Hashem employs to bring us to the place where we can achieve that ultimate goodness, and the journey from the world's birth to its destiny is long and complex. But it starts with kindness.

Why, at the heart of everything, do we talk to each other politely and kindly? It is not simply a way to keep the peace. It is because we must always orient ourselves to see others in the way that Hashem sees us. We can never see others as objects through which we achieve our own interests, as mere accessories in our quest to find our way towards success, or as rivals whom we must constantly keep in their place. What we must always see first is a person about whom we care, a person for whom we want goodness, a person who -- no matter the context of the discussion we must have -- we want to help come to something better. We speak politely -- yes, even obsequiously -- because it speaks of our most basic posture towards each other. And that most basic posture is kindness.

This is what Yaakov was reminding Eisav. Eisav certainly has a finely honed capacity for fighting for what he wants, for living by the sword and avenging what he thinks is his. But Yaakov, in part, talks him around by reminding him that he has skipped the first step, and in so doing, he has forgotten the most basic element of our relationships. He presents Eisav with his family, built on togetherness and kindness, a stark contrast to the tortured and fractured relationships that the end of parsha describes in Eisav's descendants. When Eisav suggests he will accompany him to his next destination, Yaakov talks about how careful he has to be with the small children, even the animals. He is showing Eisav what really builds connections and what real connection. And that

little bit of kindness takes Eisav back to basics; it turns him just far enough around to allow Yaakov to go his own way.

We will not delve into Chanukah just yet. But the light of menorah tells us much the same message. After all the struggle, after the years of military struggle and internal strife which was not at all concluded, Hashem sent us a miracle in the form of the light of the menorah. Light, after all, is the very first thing Hashem made in this world. Light takes us back to the very beginning; it stands for the primeval emanation that begins to bring us into being. And at the beginning is kindness. In the midst of the darkness of the Greek exile, in the tortured throes of our confusion about whether Hashem still cared and looked after us when we could not see Him, Hashem sent us a reminder that it was all bringing us to something good.

In today's style of communication, the culture rewards people who can skip the niceties and get straight to the insult. When you score points but you only have so much time to grab someone's attention, the sharpest barb is what grabs attention and attracts your followers, not kindness and politeness. We make accusations when we mean to make suggestions, and we make demands before we say hello. We sometimes turn conversation into a contest for verbal conquest. But *es is nisht unzere derech*; this is not our way. We have to build our world, and our relationships, on kindness. And we pray that Hashem will, in turn, uncover all the kindness that He is waiting to show us.