**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT MIKETZ**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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Dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky zt"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Miketz tells of Yosef’s brothers journeying from their home in Canaan to Egypt in order to purchase grain, as food was unavailable in Canaan due to the harsh drought that struck the region. Upon arriving, they came before Yosef, who had risen to the position of vizier in Egypt and oversaw the distribution of grain, and who proceeded to accuse the brothers of coming as spies.

In telling of the brother’s arrival in Egypt, the Torah writes, “The children of Israel came to purchase among those who came…” (42:5). The Talmud Yerushalmi (Berakhot 7:3, and elsewhere) cites this verse as a source for the concept of a *minyan* – that ten men comprise a “congregation” with respect to public prayer. The Torah in Sefer Vayikra (22:32) commands, “*Ve-nikdashti be-tokh Benei Yisrael*” – “I shall be sanctified among the Children of Israel,” which *Chazal* understood as implying that certain prayers, which declare the sanctity of God, may be recited only “among *Benei Yisrael*” – in a public setting where a group of Jews has assembled. According to the Talmud Yerushalmi, the precise definition of a “public setting” with respect to this requirement is determined based on the word “*be-tokh*” (“among”) used in reference to Yaakov’s ten sons arriving in Egypt: “*Va-yavo’u benei Yisrael li-shbor* ***be-tokh*** *ha-ba’im*.” As the word “*be-tokh*” is used here in reference to ten men, we may conclude that public prayer, to which the Torah refers with the phrase “***be-tokh*** *Benei Yisrael*,” likewise requires the presence of ten men. The Talmud Yerushalmi then cites a view which connects these two verses differently, noting that the term “*benei Yisrael*” appears in both. Either way, the definition of public prayer, according to the Talmud Yerushalmi, is established on the basis of the Torah’s description of Yaakov’s ten sons traveling to Egypt to purchase grain. (The Talmud Bavli, in Masekhet Megilla (23b), establishes the requirement of ten men for public prayer from a different source.)

This inference should perhaps be understood in light of the comments of the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba*, 91), cited briefly by Rashi (42:3), claiming that Yosef’s brothers traveled to Egypt to do more than simply purchase grain for their families. According to the Midrash, the brothers regretted having sold Yosef as a slave to merchants traveling to Egypt, and wished to look for him in Egypt so they could buy him back and bring him home. Ostensibly, they arrived in Egypt to obtain food; in truth, they also wished to find their long-lost brother.

With this in mind, we can perhaps understand the deeper significance of the Yerushalmi’s inferring the concept of public prayer from Yosef’s brothers’ journey to Egypt. When we turn to God in prayer, our minds and hearts are naturally focused on obtaining “food” – asking God to provide us with our needs and to fulfill our hearts’ wishes. Like Yosef’s brothers, who could not obtain food in Canaan and thus traveled to Egypt to purchase grain, we, too, have unfulfilled needs and wishes, and concerns about the future, and we turn to God in prayer begging Him to provide all that we lack. However, by pointing to the model of Yosef’s brothers, the Yerushalmi perhaps seeks to instruct that we should also have another purpose in mind when we approach God – to help our brother, to bring back those who are lost, alone, in pain, and suffering. We should approach prayer with not only our own personal needs and wishes in mind, but also those of our long-lost brothers and sisters, for our fellow Jews whoever and wherever they are, who desperately need the Almighty’s assistance.

This is the fundamental concept underlying the institution of *tefila be-tzibur* (public prayer). *Chazal* urge us to pray not alone, but with our fellow Jews, together as a collective entity. We are to petition God not only to help us and our families, but to help all *Am Yisrael*, each and every member of our nation, and so we join together with other Jews for collective, group prayer, rather than praying independently.

Moreover, the model of the brothers’ trip to Egypt, in *Chazal*’s view, is one of reconciliation, an example of people who sincerely regretted the hostility they showed towards their brother, and desperately sought to repair their broken relationship. This, too, is part of *Chazal*’s vision of *tefila be-tzibur*. We join together with fellow Jews, some of whom we might have quarreled with, or may have harbored hostile feeling towards, and bond together to form a unified group, and we pray to God on behalf of our entire nation. Yosef’s brothers are a model of *tefila be-tzibur* because public prayer is meant, in part, to bring people together in peace and camaraderie, to eliminate the barriers that divide us, so we can approach God as one people, bound by feelings of mutual love and respect, and unified in our desire to beseech the Almighty to bless His entire nation with peace, joy and prosperity.

(Based on a *drasha* by Rabbi Dov Loketch)

Sunday

Parashat Miketz tells of the travails experienced by Yaakov’s sons after arriving in Egypt to purchase grain. Yosef, whom they did not recognize, was the Egyptian vizier, and when he saw his brothers, he immediately accused them of coming as spies. He imprisoned Shimon and instructed the rest of the brothers to return to Canaan and bring their youngest brother, Binyamin, with them back to Egypt. Yaakov initially refused to allow his sons to bring Binyamin with them back to Egypt, but he eventually relented. As he sent them off, he offered a brief prayer that God assist them: “*Kel Sha-ddai* shall grant you compassion before the man, that he send with you your other brother and Binyamin” (43:14).

A creative interpretation of this verse is suggested by Rav Shlomo Kluger, in his *Imrei Shefer*. He writes that while the expression “*yitein lakhem rachamim*” (“shall grant you mercy”) is normally understood to mean that God should have the vizier treat the brothers compassionately, it might also mean that God should help the brothers themselves be merciful. For example, the Torah in Sefer Devarim (13:18) promises that in reward for compliance with the commands regarding the *ir ha-nidachat* (city whose townspeople all worshipped idols), “*ve-natan lekha rachamim*” – “He [God] shall grant you compassion.” Some commentators understood this as a promise that God would help the people develop a merciful character in reward for fulfilling His commands. Likewise, Rav Kluger suggests that Yaakov was blessing his sons that they themselves should develop within themselves the quality of mercy and compassion “before the man” – in advance of their meeting with Yosef in Egypt. In the merit of their being merciful and compassionate in their dealings with other people, they would be worthy of being treated compassionately by the suspicious Egyptian vizier.

While it is difficult to accept this reading as the actual interpretation of Yaakov’s prayer, Rav Shlomo Kluger here conveys the important message that we cannot seek other people’s compassion without working to engender this quality within ourselves. Our desire to earn the favor and goodwill of the people around us should motivate us to treat others with sensitivity and mercy. We often naturally tend to complain about the way we are treated without scrutinizing our own conduct and working to ensure we treat others properly. Rav Shlomo Kluger’s creative insight reminds us to pay at least as much attention to the way we treat other people as we do to the way we are treated by others.

Monday

Several different approaches have been taken to explain Yosef’s intentions in scheming against his brothers when they arrived in Egypt to purchase grain. As the Torah tells in Parashat Miketz, Yosef – who was now the Egyptian vizier who oversaw the sale of grain, but whom his brothers did not recognize – accused his brothers of coming as spies. He ordered them to prove their innocence by bringing the youngest brother who, according to their claim, had remained in Canaan. In the meantime, he held Shimon in prison as “security.” When the brothers returned with Binyamin, Yosef had his silver goblet planted in Binyamin’s luggage in order to frame him. After the brothers left Egypt and began making their way back home, Yosef send his butler to chase after them and search through their belongings. Sure enough, the goblet was found, and the brothers were brought back to Egypt. Yosef insisted on keeping Binyamin in Egypt as punishment for his crime, and then Yehuda – who had assumed responsibility for Binyamin – begged Yosef to allow him to remain in Binyamin’s stead.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary (42:9), explains that Yosef’s actions were geared towards eliminating the enmity and hostility of the past so that the family could be successfully reunited. As Rav Hirsch writes in his concluding remarks to this passage in his commentary, “What good would it have done his father to regain one son and lose ten others, to have had to think of his family circle being split into two camps in opposition and in a state of enmity towards each other?” Before Yosef revealed his identity to his brothers and had them come to live in Egypt with Yaakov to reunite the family, he wanted to lay the groundwork for reconciliation. He needed to ensure his own preparedness to forget and forgive the brothers’ past hostilities, and that they longer felt the resentment and ill-will that prompted them to drive him away from the family. The first goal, Rav Hirsch explained, was achieved by Yosef seeing if they would again be prepared to take a son away from Yaakov. When he saw how they refused to allow Binyamin to remain in Egypt, he was able to eliminate, in Rav Hirsch’s words, “the last drops of bitterness…from his heart,” as he saw that they recognized their mistake and would never again return to their father without one of their brothers.

As for eliminating the “bitterness” from the brothers’ hearts, Rav Hirsch explains that this was achieved by Yosef showing them the full extent of his control over them. They despised him and felt compelled to banish him from the family because of his dreams of leadership, which they feared he would utilize for selfish interests. They assumed that Yosef aspired to rule over them with cruel, heartless brutality, and they therefore drove him away from the family in order to protect themselves. When they now came before Yosef as hungry foreigners desperate to purchase grain from him, the ruler of the only country in the region with food, he wanted to show them that their assumptions were wrong. Rav Hirsch explains:

Joseph remembered his dreams, remembered how his dreams awoke in his brethren the idea of his seeking to become king, and of the danger this threat was to them and their mission, and how this suspicion grew to such conviction that they could feel themselves justified, in supposed self-defense, in committing the greatest crime. If this was the case when he ran about amongst them in his fur-trimmed coat, how much more must he now be looked on by them with fear and anxiety when he really was a “king,” and moreover had reason to hate them, and, in the way of ignoble natures, to take his revenge on them. It was therefore more than necessary that they shall learn to know him in his true character, and for that it was above all, necessary for them to be shown what his actual position Egypt really was… they must be made to realize that he could do with them whatever he wished, and if then, instead of all that they feared, he turned out to be their greatest benefactor, and only used his power to ensure their happiness, he could hope that thereby they would be cured from all their erroneous ideas about him.

According to Rav Hirsch, Yosef, who saw his dreams of dominion over his brothers being realized, fully intended to utilize this power to care for them during a period of grave crisis, when their families faced dire hunger. However, for the sake of the future of the family, he needed to first make it clear to them that he indeed enjoyed absolute control over them. By first showing them just how much power he exerted, he ensured that their past fears would be put to rest when he finally revealed his identity and promised to support them and their families. Once they saw that his dreams have been fulfilled, and that he indeed had full control over their lives, they would recognize that he dreamt not of abusing his power, but of using it to assist them, and they would then recognize that their hatred and suspicions were unwarranted.

Rav Hirsch’s approach sheds light on the nature of the brothers’ hostile reaction to Yosef’s dreams, which led them to conspire against him. Simply put, they were scared. They erroneously assumed that Yosef dreamt of power which he could abuse to oppress them, and thus they felt they needed to protect the family by eliminating him. The truth, as Yosef ultimately showed them, was that to the contrary, Yosef dreamt of leadership which he could use to help, sustain and support his family. He had no plans to abuse his power; his intent was to utilize it to help them.

Very often, hostility arises between people because of this very kind of mistake – unfounded suspicions and wrongly attributing nefarious motives. Many situations of strife and conflict between friends and family members result from misunderstandings and mistaken interpretations of people’s ambitions and intentions. The painful story of Yosef and his brothers should remind us that we know less about other people’s thoughts, feelings and motives than we think we do, and we must therefore hesitate before we interpret their intentions as hostile and threatening.

Tuesday

Parashat Miketz concludes with the story of Yosef ordering his servant to frame his younger brother, Binyamin, by placing his silver goblet in Yosef’s bag before Binyamin left with the other brothers from Egypt back to Canaan. After the brothers left, Yosef told his servant to pursue the brothers and then accuse them of theft and inspect their bags. Indeed, Yosef’s goblet was found in Binyamin’s bag, whereupon the brothers were brought back to Egypt. They stood before Yosef, who declared that Binyamin would have to remain in Egypt as his slave.

The *Midrash Tanchuma* comments that after the goblet was found in Binyamin’s luggage, his brothers began beating him, furious over his having stolen the goblet. They called him, “thief, son of a thief,” charging that he had brought them shame just as his mother, Rachel, had brought shame upon the family when she stole her father’s religious articles (31:19).

According to the Midrash, Binyamin’s brothers believed that he had stolen Yosef’s goblet. When the goblet was discovered, their reaction was not that it was planted in Binyamin’s bag, but rather than Binyamin stole it from Yosef’s home where they had eaten.

While this claim might initially sound surprising, it is supported by the text. When the brothers returned to Egypt and came before Yosef, they made no attempt at all to defend themselves by alleging that somebody had framed Binyamin. Instead, they humbly confessed, and offered to remain in Egypt as Yosef’s slaves (44:16). We might have expected them to point out to the vizier that just as during their first visit to Egypt, when somebody mysteriously returned their money to their luggage, on this occasion, too, somebody planted the goblet in Binyamin’s sack. Indeed, due to this question, the classic commentators understood the brothers’ confession as a confession for some other misdeed that they had committed for which God was now punishing them by having them framed. The *Midrash Tanchuma*, however, seems to have understood that the brothers truly confessed to the crime for which they were charged, as they believed that Binyamin stole the goblet.

However, if so, then we need to address the question of why they made this assumption. After all, it was clear that they were being targeted, as Yosef had baselessly suspected them of spying and somebody had mysteriously returned their money. Why did they not realize that the goblet, too, was placed in Binyamin’s sack?

One possibility, perhaps, is that the money’s return to their bags could have, conceivably, been the result of human error. As Yaakov told his sons before they left for Egypt the second time, “Perhaps it was a mistake” (43:12). It was at least conceivable that there was some technical mishandling that resulted in their money being returned. Yosef’s goblet, however, could not possibly have ended up in Binyamin’s bag by mistake, and thus the brothers assumed that he indeed stole it.

The Midrash perhaps alludes to a different reason, in its comment that the brothers called Binyamin “thief, son of a thief.” It seems that according to the Midrash, the brothers viewed Binyamin with suspicion because of his “family history” of theft. Just as Rachel had stolen her father’s religious articles when the family left Charan, prompting him to pursue them, similarly, the brothers figured, her son now stole a precious object from Egypt as they left to return home, prompting the servant to pursue them and bring them back.

Needless to say, however, it is very difficult to understand how Rachel’s one-time precedent would lead the brothers to actually suspect her son of theft. Even if that instance of theft somehow a tendency to steal that could have influenced Rachel’s children – something which would be very hard to accept – Rachel died immediately after Binyamin’s birth, and thus he would not have been under this influence. It is therefore difficult to understand why, as the Midrash seems to imply, the brothers suspected Binyamin because he was Rachel’s son.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the view of the *Midrash Tanchuma* that when Yosef’s goblet was discovered in Binyamin’s bag, his brothers assumed that he had indeed stolen the goblet. They angrily called him “thief, son of a thief,” a reference to the fact that his mother, Rachel, had stolen her father’s cherished religious articles under somewhat similar circumstances as Binyamin’s alleged theft.

This account also appears in a different Midrashic source, *Bereishit Rabba* (92:8), which records Binyamin’s response to his brothers’ charge. In contrast to the *Midrash Tanchuma* praises Binyamin for remaining silent in the face of his brothers’ false accusation of theft, asserting that the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was built in Binyamin’s territory in reward for his silence in the face of suspicion, *Bereishit Rabba* tells of a tense exchange between Binyamin and his brothers. After his brothers accused him of stealing the goblet, the Midrash tells, Binyamin replied, “The person of Yosef is here; the goats are here; the brothers who sold their brother are here.” While Binyamin’s response is not entirely clear, it has been suggested that according to this account, Binyamin responded to his brothers’ harsh accusation by turning around and accusing them of framing him. He told them that just as they conspired to eliminate Yosef – Rachel’s older child – from the family, they were likewise now conspiring to eliminate Binyamin – Rachel’s younger child. The goblet, Binyamin charged, was the parallel to the goat which the brothers had slaughtered after selling Yosef to make it appear as though Yosef had been killed by a beast. He accused the brothers of planting the goblet in his bag so he would be charged with theft and kept as a slave in Egypt – just as they had sold Yosef as a slave in Egypt. (This explanation of the Midrash’s comments is suggested by the *Beit Ha-levi*.)

The Midrash’s account underscores how the brothers’ situation as they stood before Yosef in Egypt marked the reversal – and hence, the rectification – of the sale of Yosef some twenty years earlier. Yosef essentially arranged a situation whereby his brothers had the precise same opportunity as they had on that fateful day when he went to see them as they shepherded their father’s herds. Now as then, they had the opportunity to eliminate their father’s favored son whom they resented, the son of his favorite wife, Rachel, and to conceal their crime. When Yosef came to the brothers, they sold him as a slave and pretended he was killed by an animal; now, they could have had Binyamin taken as a slave in Egypt and pretended that this happened because he stole a precious article. And, according to the Midrash, this is precisely what Binyamin thought was happening. Regardless, the brothers had the perfect opportunity to repeat the crime of *mekhirat Yosef*, only this time, they did the opposite, as Yehuda selflessly pleaded on Binyamin’s behalf.Whether or not this was Yosef’s intention is subject to a good deal of discussion and debate among the commentators. What is clear, however, is that Yehuda’s plea to Yosef, and his courageous insistence that he be kept as a slave in Binyamin’s place, demonstrates the process of repentance which the brothers had undergone, and that they would never again consider betraying their brother – even a brother whom they had reason to suspect of theft.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Miketz tells of the birth of Yosef’s two sons in Egypt after he became the country’s vizier. His second son was named Efrayim, we read, to commemorate the fact that “*hifrani Elokim be-eretz onyi*” – “God has made me fruitful in my land of suffering” (41:52).

The Tosafists, in *Da’at Zekeinim*, assert that the name “Efrayim” also has an additional connotation. This word, the Tosafists note, can be read to mean “double ashes.” The reference, they explain, is to Yosef’s great-grandfather and grandfather – Avraham and Yitzchak – who are both associated in some way with ashes. Avraham, in his plea to God to spare the city of Sedom, declared, “I am but earth and ash” (“*…anokhi afar va-eifer*” – Bereishit 18:27). As for Yitzchak, *Chazal* in several contexts speak of God considering Yitzchak’s “ashes” collected on the altar, as he was nearly slaughtered as a sacrifice (see, for example, Rashi to Vayikra 26:42, citing *Torat Kohanim*). In naming his son Efrayim, the Tosafists write, Yosef was recalling his illustrious forebears, both of whom are associated with ashes.

Why would the Tosafists draw this connection between Yosef’s situation in Egypt and Avraham and Yitzchak’s association with ashes?

Rav Aharon Yehuda Leib Steinman (*Ayelet Ha-shachar – Zemirot Shabbat*, p. 140) suggests that this connection relates to Yosef’s newfound position of authority and prestige. The Tosafists here teach that Yosef overcame the moral challenges of power, and retained his piety, integrity and sensitivity, because he followed the examples represented by these two references to ashes. Avraham was a man of extraordinary achievements and stature, but he lived with a sense of “*anokhi afar va-eifer*,” that in relation to God, all human beings are, essentially, “earth and ash.” Yosef never allowed his position of power to lead to pride and arrogance, and remained keenly and humbly aware of his limitations and lowly stature in relation to the Almighty. Secondly, Yosef followed the example of Yitzchak, the model of boundless self-sacrifice and devotion, who was bound on the altar as a sacrifice, symbolic of complete, unbridled commitment. Yosef understood that his role as leader was to be used not for selfish interests, but for the benefit of others. Indeed, he utilized his position in Egypt to save the entire region from starvation by overseeing the storage of grain during the surplus years and its distribution during the subsequent drought years. This is the significance of the Tosafists’ reference in this context to Avraham and Yitzchak’s respective associations with ashes.

The Tosafists here seek to give insight into Yosef’s piety even as he ruled over the largest empire on earth, attributing his righteous character to his humility and his selflessness – his keen awareness that even the most accomplished human is as lowly as “ashes” before God, and is to selflessly devote his life to the service of God and of mankind.

Friday

The opening verses of Parashat Miketz tell of Pharaoh’s unusual dreams which Yosef correctly interpreted as predictions of seven imminent years of agricultural surplus which would be followed by seven years of harsh drought. Pharaoh dreamt first of seven robust cows being devoured by seven emaciated cows, and then of seven large sheaves of grain being devoured by seven lean sheaves. Yosef informed Pharaoh that both dreams heralded the same sequence of events – seven surplus years which would be “devoured” by the subsequent seven years of shortage.

The Torah tells that in Pharaoh’s dream of the cows, the first set of cows appeared not only large and robust, but also “*yefot mar’eh*” – literally, “good-looking” (41:2). Conversely, the lean cows were described as “*ra’ot mar’eh*” – “bad-looking” (41:3). Rashi explains that these descriptions allude to the fact that during years of surplus and financial comfort, people appear “good-looking” to one another, in the sense that there is little competition and selfishness. When people feel the need to compete over limited resources, the tension causes them to view each other as “bad-looking,” as a competitor against whom they need to struggle. But when there is a surplus, people view each other positively, as comrades, as they feel no need to struggle and compete. And thus the large, healthy cows, which heralded the onset of the surplus years, are described as “good-looking,” symbolizing the positivity with which the people would regard one another during those years. The seven lean cows are described as “bad-looking” because people tend to look upon one another with a degree of hostility during years of shortage.

The Midrash applies this theme also to another aspect of Pharaoh’s dreams. The seven healthy cows are described as grazing “*ba-achu*,” which *Targum Onkelos* and several commentators interpret as referring to pasture. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba*, 89; see also *Tanchuma Yashan*), however, interprets the word “*achu*” as a reference to “fraternity,” and explains this description to mean, “At the time when the years are prosperous, people become brothers to each other.” The cows grazed together, calmly and peacefully, signifying the peaceful relations that prevail among people during times of economic prosperity.

It seems clear that the message these sources seek to convey is that we need to work especially hard during periods of hardship to look at other people positively and as “brothers.” The reality that people are insensitive and overly competitive during periods of shortage is depicted here not as an ideal, but to the contrary, as something we should endeavor to change. When we face adversity and experience hardship, we tend to become self-absorbed and insufficiently attuned to other people. When we resemble “lean cows,” when we experience challenging times, we find it difficult to view other people as “good-looking” – to like, admire and deeply care for them, overburdened as we are with our own troubles. The sources cited above call upon us to try, to whatever extent we can, to maintain our positive outlook on the people around us even while struggling with our own difficulties, and to look at then as our “brothers” to whom we are committed under all circumstances.

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