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Joseph:
Vengeance
or Justice?

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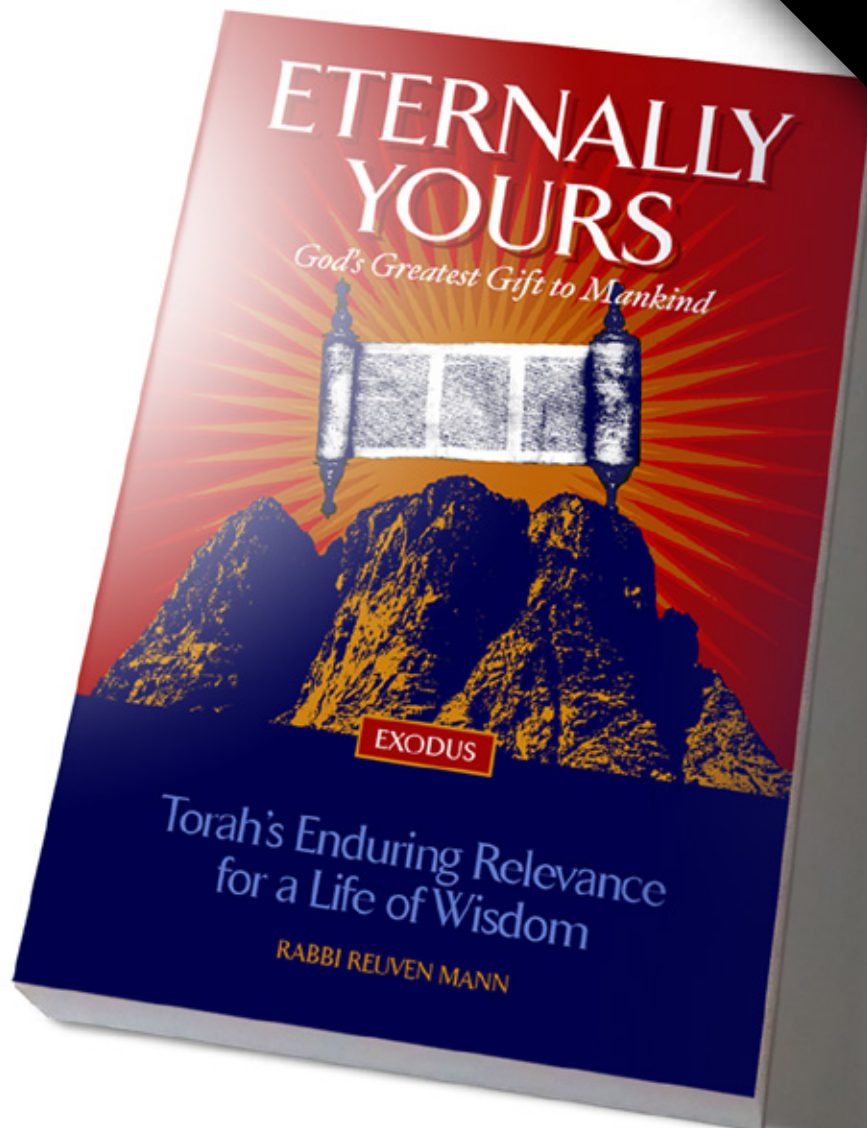
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RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

No Soap Opera Here

After Yosef's revelation of his identity to his brothers, at the beginning of the Torah portion of Vayigash, he commands them to return to their father as soon as possible. One can only imagine the intense emotions as the brothers began explaining to Yaakov the sequence of events culminating in the upcoming reunion. The Torah describes Yaakov's initial reaction (Bereishit 45:26):

"And they told him, saying, 'Joseph is still alive,' and [they told him] that he ruled over the entire land of Egypt, and his heart changed, for he did not believe them."

One can understand Yaakov's doubt, as this news was something he was not remotely prepared for. The brothers persist (ibid 27):

"And they told him all of Joseph's words that he had said to them, and he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, and the spirit of their father Jacob was revived."

Now that Yaakov realized the authenticity of the claims, he responds in a forceful manner (ibid 28):

"And Israel said, 'Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.'"

Many of the commentators, such as Rashi, offer an explanation matching the drama of the moment:

"I have enough happiness and joy, since my son Joseph is still alive"

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And why not? One cannot fathom the intense gladness he must have felt at this very moment.

There are two Midrashic interpretations which introduce another dimension to Yaakov's reaction. Targum Yonatan explains how Yaakov, in his reaction to the news, was reflecting first on all the good God had done for him up to that point. He had been saved from Eisav and Lavan. When the Canaanites threatened his family after the incident in Shechem, he was saved once again. Yaakov had experienced the great comforts offered by God, longing to receive them. The disappearance of Yosef was different. Yaakov had stopped hoping to see Yosef ever again. Now that Yaakov knew Yosef was alive, he had to go see him immediately.

The other Midrashic view (found in the Midrash Aggada) offers a different observation on the part of Yaakov. He marveled at the incredible strength exhibited by Yosef. Yosef had suffered mightily, and through it all, he maintained his righteousness.

Clearly, both approaches lead us away from the more emotional picture the simple reading of the story conveys. Why add this other layer to the story?

When analyzing the interaction and behavior of our forefathers, it behooves us to understand that these were unique human beings. As such, there is always a tension that requires awareness and caution. On the one hand, it is tempting to project onto them what we, as the "norm", would think. Bringing them down to our level then removes the "uniqueness" of these people, and they no longer serve as examples to learn from. In fact, bringing them to a level of equality, if not lower, helps buttress an outsized view of the self. Conversely, there are those

who deify our forefathers. These individuals transcend humanity, free from any defect. If indeed they are on such a level, how can we learn anything of practical value from them? It is as if to say there is a different species of human called "forefather" and we are unable to identify with them on any level. Each of these extremes may provide some degree of religious security or reinforcement of self-importance to those who analyze them in such a manner. No doubt, the image of who these individuals were becomes completely distorted.

That is not to say that the middle road is an easy one to find. The forefathers were unique, but unique human beings. They were highly perfected but were not perfect. As well, as each had a critical role to play in the forging of the nation. Therefore, presenting an emotionally charged family reunion is not the end game of the Torah.

The above Midrashic explanations can assist us in the appropriate manner of viewing the forefathers. The Torah presents a scene replete with drama. Yaakov discovering that Yosef, his beloved son, was alive. And not just alive, but the viceroy in Egypt. He was not immune to the rush of emotions any father would have in such a situation. In fact, a search of comparable moments in other works of literature or cinema could certainly bring out even more of the emotions the Torah describes. But the Torah is not a storybook. The Torah is a repository of God's wisdom, and as such, every episode recorded is an opportunity for us to tap into that wisdom. Yes, Yaakov was experiencing the same emotional rush any father would. Yaakov, though, was also the leader of the burgeoning Jewish nation. Whereas one might expect

Yaakov to cast off his role and "merely" act like a father would, Yaakov understood that Yosef being alive meant much more than his own progeny still alive.

Targum Yonatan offers one insight into Yaakov's mindset as he came to grips with the realization Yosef was alive. Yaakov understood how critical his role was in securing the future nation. While of course his rescue from various enemies was not necessitated, the fact God intervened on his behalf presaged a certain reality of how the Divine plan was unfolding. Finally, after years on the run, he was able to focus on the next stages in developing his progeny and securing the ideology. Tragedy struck with Yosef's apparent death. As such, with Yosef gone, the idea of a complete nation was gone as well. Losing Yosef produced such a massive void that Yaakov saw no future for the Jewish people. He had lost hope, and with Yosef returning, was now able to refocus himself on the necessary task of leading the Jewish people forward.

The Midrash adds to this overall way of thinking. Hearing Yosef was alive was of course the critical news. However, there was an entire background story, culminating with Yosef's rise to power in Egypt. Immersed in Egyptian culture could very well mean the assimilation of foreign ideologies and cultural values. Yaakov had hope that now his mission could continue. Yosef, though, had to be a person with the right personality traits and attachment to the correct path for the plan to continue. To have Yosef alive was of course something every father would be overcome with knowing. In the case of Yaakov, this was "only" a part of the story. Was this the same Yosef who he saw as being a future leader of the Jewish people? Or had he been corrupted by his surroundings? To understand Yosef as maintaining his righteousness meant that the void that had been created no longer existed.

The above two interpretations are an ideal example of the view we should take when analyzing our forefathers. They were not gods, nor regular folk. Each story presents one layer of a much deeper set of ideas. In this case, the objective of the Torah is to not just present the drama of a reunion between father and son. We see in Yaakov someone who realized more than the return of his son. He saw his role being re-established and the future of the Jewish people coming into clear focus. ■



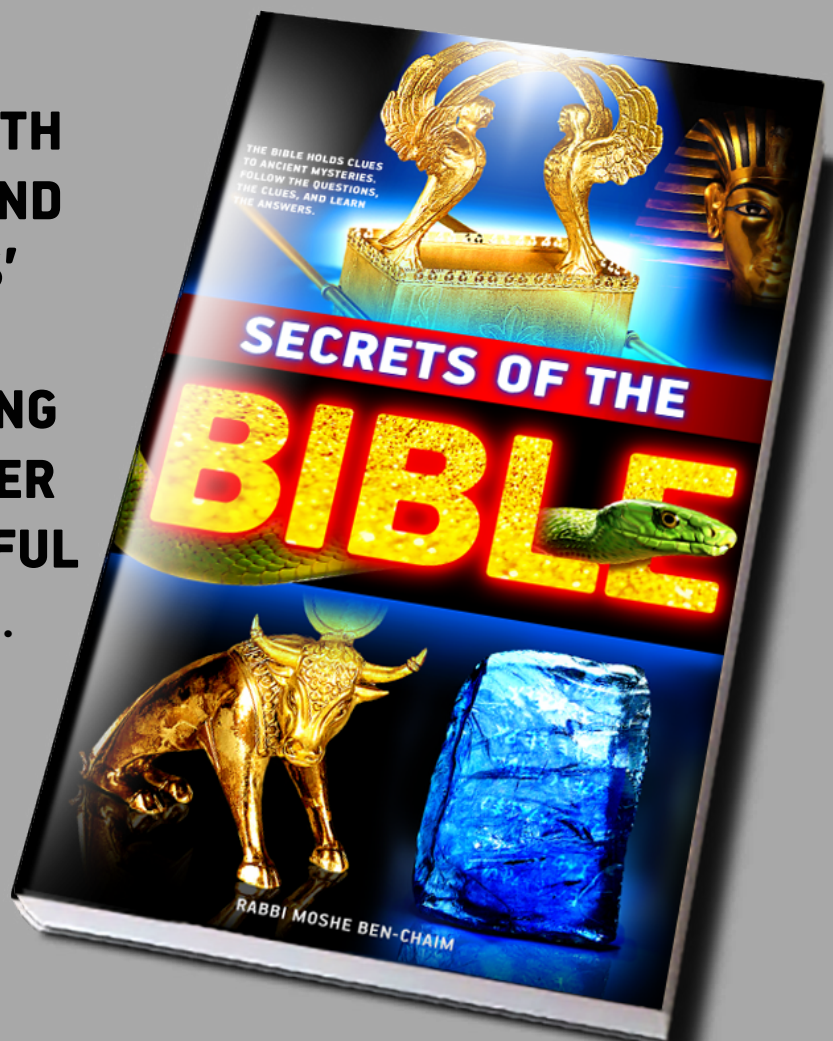
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the Greatest Psalm

SEEING GOD IN EVERYTHING

Rabbi Israel Chait STUDENT'S TRANSCRIPTION

Ibn Ezra writes regarding Psalm 139:

This Psalm is of great value [very honored] in the paths of God and there is not in these five books of Psalms any poem like it. And in accord with a man's understanding in the ways of God and the ways of the soul, one should ponder its reasoning.

The Psalm says as follows:

You understand my sittings and my risings. You established all my ways before me. There is no word on my tongue; You, God, know everything. You formed me, my front and my back; You placed Your hand upon me. The knowledge is astonishing, it is too high; I am incapable of understanding. Where will I go from Your spirit and where can I escape from before You? If I ascend to Heaven, there You are, if I descend to the netherworld, there You are. If I take flight with dawn even at the ends of the ocean, Your hand leads me, Your right hand will hold me....

I will praise You for Your astonishing works, my soul understands very well.

King David goes on to say that God has knowledge of every aspect of his existence. He expresses how valuable God's friendship is to him.

What is the meaning of this poem? Rabbeinu Yona says on "Man is exacted without his knowledge" that people complain that their suffering is unjust. Rabbeinu Yona says that this is the worst state as one does not recall the sin that earned his suffering. What is the essence of Rabbeinu Yona's metaphor? Man sees the world in two frameworks. In one framework, he functions as a pleasure seeker. The store represents the satisfaction of one's fantasies. The shopper tries not to be concerned about the price of his purchases, for that is a painful element. So, he represses the price he must pay, which explains why people run up so much debt. People are in denial about

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their ultimate obligation to pay. This is not the state of mind of the shopper alone, but of people in general and how they look at life. That's why Rabbeinu Yona says that the fool thinks the reason for life is solely to attain pleasure.

Then Rabbeinu Yona describes those who are punished without knowledge, who feel their punishment or suffering is unjustified, and so they die without repentance. What is the connection between the pleasure seeker and the feeling of unjustified suffering?

Rabbeinu Yona explains the psychology of the pleasure seeker. His mindset is maintained because he can't recognize that he did something wrong, which stems from narcissism. This element defends all of man's feelings and strivings as just and correct. Narcissism maintains a flawless self-image where one cannot perceive any wrong in himself. There is a tremendous need to love the self. Self-love becomes identified with self-seeking, so that the pleasure seeker is an expression of self-love in the first instance. As such, how does the self-loving pleasure-seeking shopper overcome the painful reality of the price of his pleasurable purchases? His narcissism enables him to deny the reality of payment. This narcissism maintains the person

as a pleasure seeker. As one is a pleasure seeker and he comes to terms with the reality that he must pay for his pleasures, what new direction in life should he take? He must follow reasoning and view himself as a small entity in the scheme of reality. His life is brief. With this perspective, one no longer gives any significance to whether or not he enjoyed this or that pleasure. His sense of value now detaches from the self, and attaches to the grand picture. One's intelligence thereby turns on the pleasure seeker [part of his personality], which is a narcissistic function: an overestimation of the self. Once one steps out of the state [of narcissism] by seeing the larger picture, the self becomes very small. Whether he had a pleasure today or not becomes an insignificant matter.

What is the meaning of King David's Psalm 139? A pleasure-seeking person views himself as distinct from God. The pleasure seeker views God as a source of obligations. At times, he cannot live with the idea of God constantly in his presence; it is disturbing. He feels he is doing things that take him away from God [he feels conflict that he cannot avoid God]. God becomes to him as something to which he approaches, but from which he also wants to withdraw. This is not a description of one who worships

God from love. This idea of escaping from God was expressed by the Jews at Sinai: "And you [Moshe] speak to us" (Deut. 5:24). Rashi says, "Moshe became weak like a woman." Rashi meant that he became incapacitated: Moshe wanted the Jews to worship God out of love [and not push God aside by asking Moshe to be an intermediary]. One who worships God out of love is a person who is constantly in God's presence. One who worships God based on fear cannot envision himself as always in God's presence; it is too disturbing psychologically. This Psalm describes a man who never withdraws from God:

*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I escape? If I go to the
heavens, there You are. If I go to the
netherworld, there You are.*

King David depicts a person who is constantly in awe of God. There is not a moment that he is removed from God. This is the highest level; this is the one who worships God out of love. On this level, the self is gone, and one is enveloped by God. He is always involved in the appreciation of God's wisdom. Even in the appreciation of his own self, he sees God's wisdom:

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

My front and my back You formed; You lay your hand on me. It is beyond my knowledge, it is a mystery, I cannot fathom it.

And this is the very point of the statement, "For my sake was the world created." This tanna [mishnaic author] did not say this as a pleasure seeker. Rather, because he experienced the level that human perfection could reach; he was awed by how God created man to live such a good existence. The tanna's experience was converted into an appreciation for God. His own personal pleasures were meaningless and nonsensical. The appreciation of God's wisdom, how man was created to appreciate that wisdom, and what perfection of man is, are all astonishing. The knowledge that is involved in the entire universe awes such a perfect person. Perfected man stands in awe of God for his external physical universe and for His design of man as well [his inner world]. Man is called a miniature world for in man's design itself exists a world of wisdom, and it reflects the wisdom of the cosmos because there is an interrelation between the cosmos and man.

Perfected man becomes so removed from himself that he views himself as an object of appreciation reflecting God's wisdom.

This lesson of Psalm 139 contains similar ideas to the metaphor of the storekeeper: to teach man to rise from the level of the pleasure seeker where he views himself distinct from God and endows himself with great importance, and reaches the level of reality where he sees himself as a wondrous creature of God, and in perceiving himself he perceives God's greatness. This is the praise to God in Psalm 139 and indeed this is what Psalms is all about. It's not so much the ideas, as these ideas are found elsewhere, but Psalms represents the perfect state and attitude of the perfected man. Therefore, the ideas of course are important, but the focus is not the ideas alone but how they affect an individual and how they place one in a frame of mind.

This is based on the idea stated earlier: Judaism is not just a logical system of ethics, rather Judaism says it is important to identify states of perfection and what is involved in those states. Here, Judaism differs from all of the philosophies [provid-

ing experience and examples]. This is what Psalms is about.

This is the institution of the Nazirite, one who abstains from pleasure. Why does the gemara say that the Nazirite is a sinner and must bring a sacrifice? It is because that is not the perfect state. In the ultimate state, one does not need to deny himself anything. Denial is necessary on the road to perfection, but it is not perfection in itself. In the perfected state, there is indifference to the pleasures because one is not self-seeking. But he is also not involved in denial. One's instincts still exist in the perfect state, but they seek what is natural: "The righteous man eats to satisfy his soul" (Proverbs 13:25). The righteous man does not eat for the pleasure of the food but to sustain his soul. Maimonides wrote a book for the Sultan, on the preservation of youth. He says that the only happy person is one who is philosophically perfected. He tries to impress upon the Sultan that happiness is achieved only with philosophical perfection and he calls that state the "even keel." In that state are neither great pleasures nor great disappointments. ■



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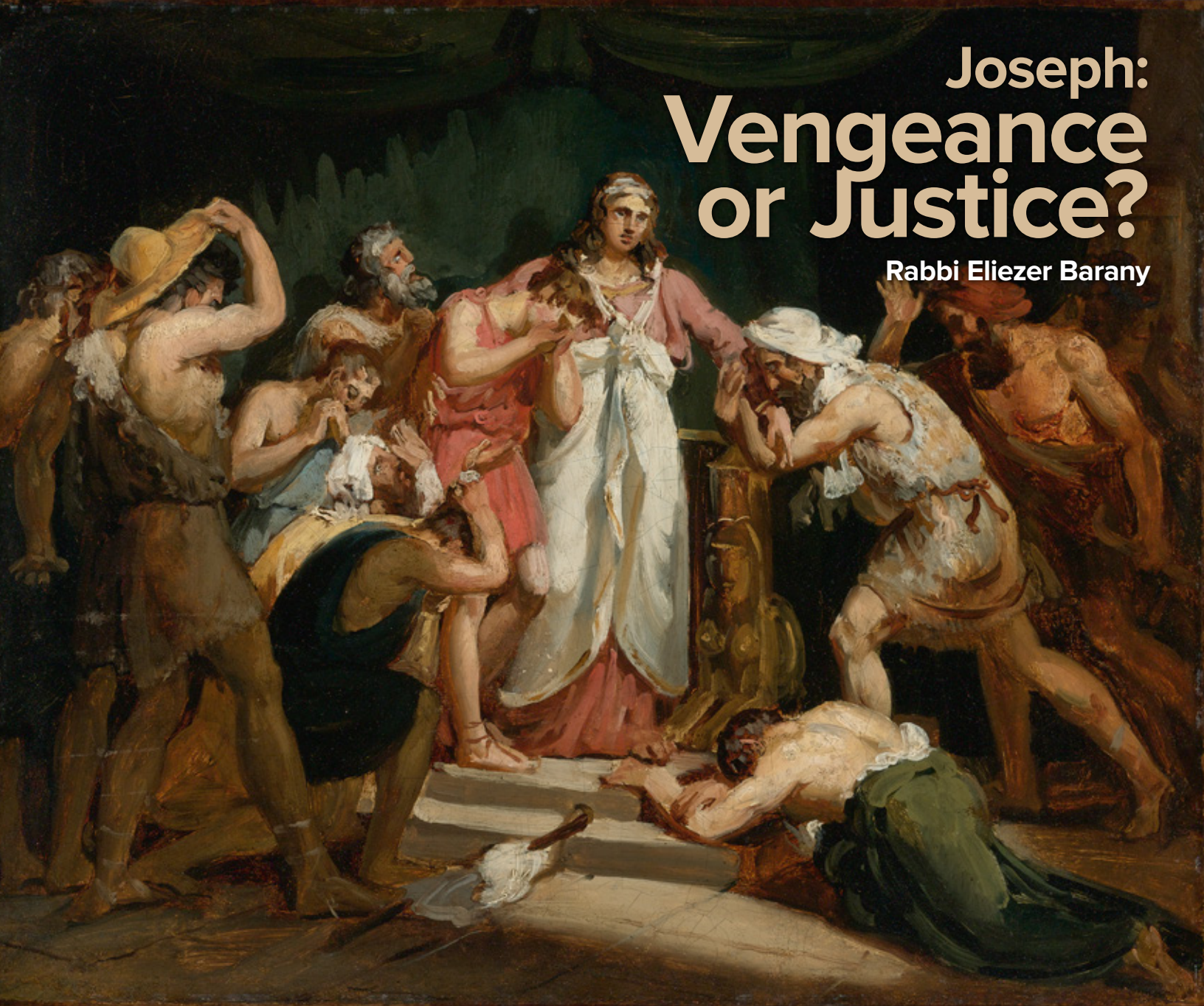
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JewishTimes

Joseph: Vengeance or Justice?

Rabbi Eliezer Barany



PARSHA

Then Yehudah approached him and said, "Please, my lord, let now your servant speak something into my lord's ears, and let not your wrath be kindled against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh. (Bereshit 44:18)

Parshat Vayigash begins with Yehudah recounting the journey of the brothers with Yosef. Yosef recognized his brothers when they came to him in Egypt for food, yet they did not recognize him. If we look to last week's Parsha, we see the beginning of their interaction:

And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them, and he said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land." (Bereshit 42:9)

It seems that the Torah expresses to us that Yosef saw his

brothers and remembered his dreams, the dreams in which his brothers and father bow down to him. Because of that he formulated the ruse that unfolded thereafter, causing much distress and heartache for the brothers.

The first question we must ask is what was the reason Yosef formed this plan? From the pesukim, it sounds like he wanted to take revenge. However, the nickname the world attributes to him is "Yosef HaTzadik," Yosef the righteous one. It would seem odd that someone we attribute much greatness to would have such animosity towards his fellow man, let alone his brothers. One may interject and say he was giving his brother's their just rewards. After all, they had abducted him and sold him into slavery. As such, it was appropriate to get back at them. In fact, Yosef chose one brother to imprison, Shimon. Rashi (Bereshit 42:24) notes that he chose Shimon because Shimon was the one to actually throw Yosef into the

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pit. Was Yosef seeking revenge?

The Jewish people do not value this approach. In fact, it is against the Torah to keep hatred in your heart, as it says in Vayikrah, “Do not hate your brother in your heart. You must surely admonish your neighbor and not bear sin because of him. Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against the children of your people. Love your neighbor as yourself. I am G-d.” (Vayikrah 19: 17-18). Therefore, certainly someone we uphold to a high standard as that of someone with a moniker of “Tzadik” should be someone not culpable of these sins.

One final answer, which I believe is quite popular, is that Yosef was orchestrating events to unfold in order to bring about Teshuva for the brothers. He was merely trying to rouse the brothers into recognition of their sin, repent, and not repeat it.

However, this answer doesn't seem to hold true if we look to last week's parshah. In fact, it seems that his motives were ulterior. He was hurt that his brothers reacted so negatively to his dreams, to which they then sold him into slavery. He seems to have a personal motive, one of revenge, not justice; two very different approaches.

Rav Yosef Dov Soleveitchik, the Rav Zt”l, explains this incident by showing that it was in fact Yosef's righteousness that was on display in this entire episode. Yosef coordinated, through God's help, a series of events to elicit teshuva from the brothers. How is this an expression of his greatness? Taking a closer look at the story reveals the answer.

At each and every step, Yosef only acted in a manner that would bring about their teshuva. He falsely accused the brothers of being spies, despite the fact that they were innocent, and then imprisoned one of them, Shimon. Yosef did not pick Shimon to imprison out of malice, rather it was to reveal the cause of this episode. It was to reveal that the brothers were now being punished because of what they did to Yosef, which the brothers then realized. Additionally, as Rashi points out based on the awkward phrasing of the Torah where Yosef, “imprisoned him before their eyes,” (Bereshis 42:24) that Yosef let Shimon out of prison immediately after the brothers left. As such, it wasn't a motivation of revenge, rather it was merely to help the brothers.

So too, Yosef needs to separate from the brothers three times because he is so overpowered by emotions that he needs to cry. He was fighting his emotions, rather than being controlled by them.

Finally, when brothers are put into the same situation as they were with Yosef, they reveal a full Teshuvah. Yosef's response is not to be cruel, or to use his dominion over them. Rather, he reveals who he is and assures them everything is all right. In fact, had he been cruel, he would have identified himself from the beginning and then exerted dominion over them regardless. This is something he does not do.

So what can be seen from this episode is that he in fact did not hate his brothers in his heart, rather he was merely trying to admonish them, the exact command found in Vayikrah.

However, my question on the Rav's explanation, and the general approach of Yosef coordinating this entire teshuvah process is, what right did he have? Can one force someone against their will, or unknowingly, to do Teshuvah? To me, it seems like the height of arrogance, or a lack of righteousness, to decide what is best for the others. Our command to rebuke someone is only with their knowledge.

However, the answer of the Rav really explains this last question as well, and is really the answer to our first question. What was the reason Yosef formulated this plan? If we look back to the planning of this whole series, we see that it was due to Yosef remembering his dreams. It was only due to the prophecy he experienced, where he was able to recognize that it was a directive from God. As such, it was not his desire for revenge to lead the brothers through this journey, rather it was through his righteousness, his desire to follow the will of Hashem that he decides to follow this plan.

Sometimes following the will of God may be difficult, in fact maybe our emotions are telling us to run in a different direction. However, I believe we can emulate Yosef HaTzadik by following His will, despite feeling uneasy at times. Only through that can we really improve ourselves and cling to the creator of the world.

Good Shabbos. ■



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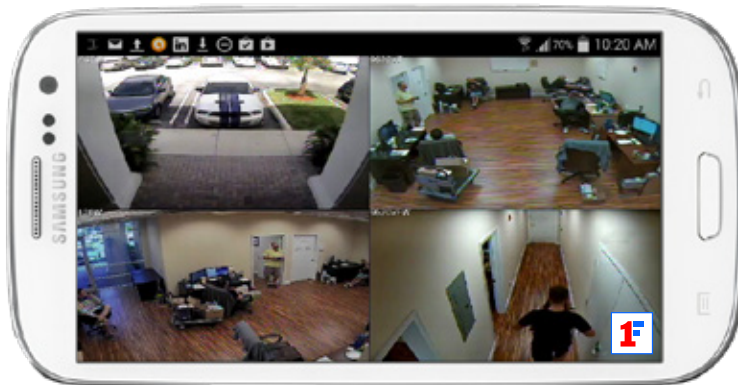
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THE CHAMPION OF FORGIVENESS

Rabbi Reuven Mann

This week's Parsha, Vayigash, depicts one of the most gut-wrenching scenes in history. Torah narratives are generally not designed to arouse the emotions; they just present the basic facts in a neutral and abbreviated manner.

The reunion between Yosef and his brothers is a unique exception. We have been following the interactions between the protagonists with bated breath. The harsh treatment his family received was not at all what we expected, when "Yosef recognized his brothers, but they didn't recognize him."

We wanted something beautiful to happen, but instead had to endure Yosef's seeming mistreatment of his siblings. Our desire for everything to work out and for everyone to live "happily ever after" is deeply ingrained in our psyches.

This attitude traces back to our childhood. Most of the stories that were

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read to us, and the movies we viewed, had a familiar pattern. They would begin with some major calamity that would arouse our concern and intensify our identification with the beloved “underdog.”

As the drama unfolded, we would feel suspense and a fear of impending disaster. Then the “miracle” would occur. The hero would enter the arena, and things would work out in the most amazing and unbelievable manner. We would breathe a sigh of relief and feel grateful that our deepest hopes had been confirmed: the good guys always win.

This is not only the outlook of a child. Even as adults, we retain an unconscious belief that, no matter how difficult things get, if we only have faith and hold on long enough, the miracle will happen and we will live “happily ever after.”

The story of Yosef and his brothers is unusual and outside the norm. In real life, things don’t work out so fortuitously. Reality teaches us that actions have consequences, and shattered relationships cannot always be magically restored.

We would not have thought that the catastrophe caused when the brothers afflicted Yosef could ever be rectified. Their purpose in selling Yosef was to incapacitate him, mentally and emotionally, and thereby neutralize any threat he may have posed to them.

The fact that Yosef not only survived but actually rose to the heights of power was something no one could have predicted. Consider all the strange happenings that had to somehow come together to bring about the reunion our Parsha records. This is not the way things “go down” in the real world.

That is, unless the Master of the universe is involved. Rashi comments on the verse that records Yaakov’s decision to send Yosef on the fateful mission to his brothers that ended in disaster. The verse (Bereishit 37:14) says, “And he sent him from the valley of Chevron...” and Rashi comments, “from the deep council of the Tzaddik (Avraham) who was buried in Chevron, in fulfillment of the promise that had been made to Avraham that “your children will be strangers in a land not their own.”

The “Hidden Hand” of Hashem was supervising all the events that resulted in the fulfillment Yosef’s prophetic dreams and his emergence as the family’s spiritual leader.

In that capacity Yosef had achieved his major objectives. The brothers repented for their misguided hatred of Yosef and for the pain they had caused their father. The culmination of the teshuva process came with Yehuda’s “approach” to Yosef. He recognized his obligation to bring Binyamin back at any cost, even the sacrifice of his own freedom.

It has been suggested that Binyamin had become (to Yaakov) a substitute for Yosef. In making his magnanimous offer, Yehuda was overcoming the brothers’ initial animosity toward Yosef and their insensitivity to the pain they had caused their father.

And what was Yosef’s reaction to the diminished condition of his brothers? He was in a position of absolute control over them and could have made them pay dearly. Instead, he sincerely forgave them and displayed great compassion.

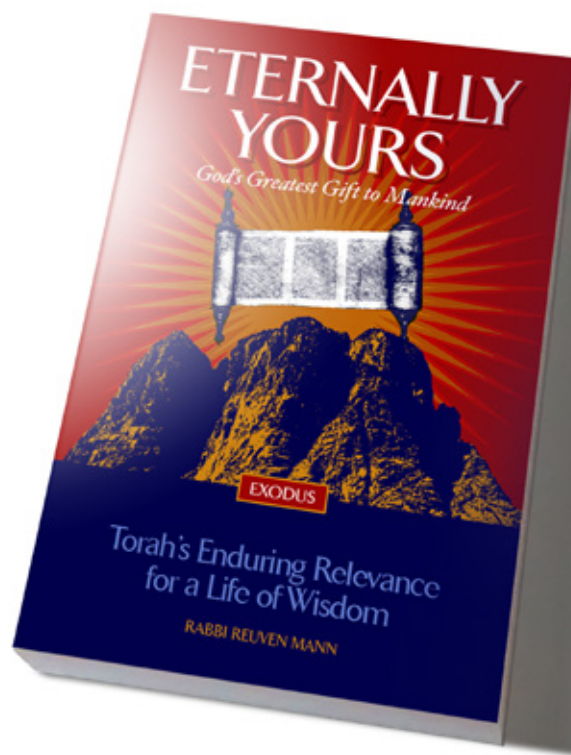
Why? Because he recognized the “Hidden Hand” in all that had happened. He understood that what had transpired was Hashem’s will, which had selected Yosef to be the instrument of the salvation of His chosen people.

Yosef realized that he, as well as his brothers, had made mistakes, but that they all had corrected their ways. He regarded his brothers as righteous people who had gone astray but had found their way back. He could now openly express the deep wellsprings of love he harbored for them.

Let us learn from Yosef, the champion of forgiveness, to “let go” of the petty slights that stick to us and forgive those who have offended us, just as we beseech Hashem to “overlook” our many manifestations of foolishness.

When love is allowed to replace hate, great things can happen, and the name of Hashem is sanctified. May we merit to achieve it.

Shabbat shalom. ■



by, Rabbi Reuven Mann

*Author of the new book
“Eternally Yours”
on Exodus*

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