

Vayiegash 5775

BS"D Parashat Vayiegash 5775

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Harsh Justice, Mercy & Forgiveness

At the end of parashat Va'ye'chi, we learn of a baffling encounter between Yosef and his brothers. They prostrated themselves before Yosef and reminded him that their father, Ya'akov, had warned him not to seek revenge. To this, Yosef answered, "Ha'ta'chat E-lo'kim ano'chi!" – "Am I God's messenger (agent) in this matter?!"

Question:

Where do we find in the Torah that Ya'akov told Yosef not to enact punishment on his brothers?

It would appear quite strange that Ya'akov would candidly and inexplicitly tell his 50 year old son, the viceroy of the day's super-power, whom he should or should not forgive.

I suggest:

Ya'akov did indeed impart to Yosef, to forgive his brothers, albeit in an obscure and sophisticated manner.

In our Parsha Va'yigash (46:29), Ya'akov meets Yosef after 20 years of separation, and Yosef collapsed in his father's arms and cried bitterly.

Rashi comments that the pasuk describes only what Yosef was

doing, but not Ya'akov's reaction. Quoting the Midrash, Rashi informs us that Ya'akov was reciting "Shema".

Now, if it was time to recite the morning or evening Shema, than Yosef should have been reciting it together with Ya'akov. And if it was not the time, why was Ya'akov saying Shema?

I believe that the Midrash is informing us of Ya'akov's profoundest thoughts at that time. At that most dramatic moment, Ya'akov's life suddenly passed before him: the good, sweet days in his parents' home before having to run away; the meeting and marriage to the beautiful, righteous Rachel; the birth of his children and his return to Eretz Yisrael. In contrast there were also the bitter days of strife with his brother Esav; the death of his beloved Rachel. And, worst of all the disappearance of his son Yosef.

Up until that moment, in Ya'akov's mind all that transpires in one's life is an emanation of either HaShem's midat ha'din – harsh quality of justice, which is expressed when referring to HaShem as **אֱלֹהֵינוּ** or HaShem's midat ha'rachamim – quality of mercy, when HaShem is expressed as **אֱלֹהֵינוּ**.

Yosef's disappearance was midat ha'din in all its ferocity.

Suddenly, at that moment when seeing Yosef and his impossible rise to power in a foreign and threatening land by the hand of God, Ya'akov realized the error in his world view. The disappearance of Yosef, which was in his mind the epitome of midat hadin, was in fact midat ha'rachamim, for it prepared the way to provide sustenance for the Jewish family (nation) at that very difficult time.

At that moment, Ya'akov understood that the dichotomy of midat ha'din and midat ha'rachamim was erroneous, for in essence they are one. Because the preparation for midat ha'rachamim in this world is a period of suffering. Ya'akov, at that moment, attempted to relate to Yosef this very crucial lesson – that the experiences which befell him at the hands of his brothers,

were God's way of providing salvation for the family, and it was all in the context of midat harachamim.

Ya'akov calls out loud so Yosef should hear his words: Shema **Yisrael** HaShem E-lo'kay'nu HaShem E'chad, not as reciting Kriat Shema, but he was speaking to himself for his own name is "Yisrael".

And Ya'akov was stating that HaShem א-ב-ג-ד which is midat ha'rachamim and אבגד-א which is midat ha'din are in fact HaShem א-ב-ג-ד E'chad – one, for both are essentially midat ha'rachamim. Here Ya'akov was telling Yosef to forgive and forget since the whole episode of his being sold was the result of midat harachamim. However, Yosef was too hurt to do so. Yosef, the victim, seeks not only compensation, but also justice in the form of punishment for the perpetrators of his suffering.

In the 17 years that Yosef lived with his brothers in apparent harmony, the brothers were cognizant of one brutal fact – Yosef never said to them sa'lach'ti – "I forgive you." So, when Ya'akov was no longer present in the family circle, the brothers prepared for the worst.

Their fears were compounded by an event, which is recorded in the Midrash.

Upon their journey to bury Ya'akov in Eretz Yisrael, the entourage passed through the Valley of Dotan, north of Shechem. At a certain spot, Yosef gave the order to halt. He then descended from his imperial carriage and walked several meters to the edge of a pit, knelt down and looked into the deep abyss. This was the pit into which he had been cast by his brothers; that same pit, empty of water but filled with snakes and scorpions.

Yosef knelt there a while and then returned without a word to continue the journey to Chevron. This was a mortifying signal for the brothers – Yosef had neither forgotten, nor forgiven.

On their return to Egypt, the brothers prostrated themselves before Yosef, and reminded him of his father's message when reciting Shema Yisrael – that their cruelty to Yosef was in fact midat ha'rachamim of God, so they did not deserve punishment.

Yosef replies that they need not worry for “ha'tachat elokim anochi” – “I am not God's messenger in this matter. I will not punish you, but punishment will be enacted when God sees fit.”

And indeed punishment was meted out to the Jewish nation 1500 years later, at the time of the Roman conquest of Eretz Yisrael in the episode of the ten martyred rabbanim. The Roman governor, after reading the story of Yosef and his brothers, informs the rabbis that since the days of the Brothers, Am Yisrael has not seen ten such great men in one generation. Therefore they will stand in lieu of the ten brothers, and pay the price for their crime of kidnapping and selling a fellow Jew, in keeping with the laws of the Torah.

As stated previously, Yosef, as a victim, informed the brothers that he is not the messenger of God to mete out their due punishment, which will come in time. It is for this reason that the episode of the Ten Martyrs is included in the Yom Kippur liturgy – so that on this solemn day, despite the fact that we are victims of other people's actions, we should forgive and forget, because not to do so might enact heavenly repercussions we all will regret.

Important Advice

In the spirit of important advice that Ya'akov gave to Yosef, I would like to suggest several rules of behavior which I have gleaned during my lifetime. The suggestions are free but are

worth their weight in gold.

The way to know if HaShem loves you

HaShem expresses His love for an individual Jew not by material gain, for there exists the concept of “rasha vetov lo’ – an evildoer who enjoys a good life. But rather by presenting to a person the opportunity to perform infrequent and unconventional mitzvot.

The secret of happiness

The cause of unhappiness is failed expectations. Do not harbor expectations even from those for whom you have done only good.

Gan Eden

One cannot gain entrance to Gan Eden by causing Gehennom for others. Simple example: Those who daven in a loud voice, so that HaShem should hear them, while disturbing other daveners.

Intimate relation with HaShem

Perform an important mitzva, but never reveal it to anyone else so the only ones who are aware of it are HaShem and you.

Your immutable and perpetual companion

All people you will meet in your lifetime will at some time enter into your life and exit it, and you will enter into their lives and leave. Parents, spouse, children and friends each one in turn will enter and eventually distance themselves. While only HaShem will never leave you until eternity.

A prescription for disaster

Satan destroys a person by infusing him with anger. The great Ramban wrote in his classic letter to his son that when one angers, all Gehennom explodes within him. The time will come when medicine will learn that anger causes imbalance in the

organic structure which then expresses itself in the worst of our diseases.

Tradition

Let every Jew, religious or not, ask himself one simple question: If 150 years ago, all Jews in the world were at my level of religiosity and Torah erudition, would there be Jews in the world today?

If all the Jews at that time were like today's Reform or Conservative leaders, then today there would not be one Jew on the planet.

The Jewish world and I

Another stellar question you should ask yourself: In what way has my presence in the world contributed to the advancement of the Jewish nation?

Silence as a value

Our rabbis in Pirkei Avot have extolled the virtues of "stika" – silence. Firstly, silence can never be misquoted. And since only about 5% of what we say every day has any relevance, it is advisable to consider for one moment, at least, if what is exploding in you to come out is really justified?

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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