

NO ONE ELSE TO BLAME

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Their hearts went out. Trembling, each one said to his brother, "What has G-d done to us?"

The gemara² relates how R. Yochanan found Reish Lakish's child declaiming, "A persons' foolishness corrupts his way, but his heart rages against Hashem." ³ R. Yochanan was bewildered. Can there be a thought developed in Kesuvim that is not at least hinted at in the Torah? The child responded. The thought certainly is hinted at - in our pasuk! "Trembling, each one said to his brother, â??What has G-d done to us?"

What does the gemara mean? How does our pasuk relate to the thought that the child cited from Mishlei? We could explain that the gemara conveys a point about the punishment Hashem inflicts upon a sinner. It is well-established that Hashem's punishments are midah keneged midah, measure for measure. We can see the justice of His actions in the way He punishes, and determine which of our shortcomings brought about a particular punishment. The gemara clues us in on another feature of His punishment: it is the sin itself that sets in motion the events that ultimately lead to the pain and grief we experience! We can see ourselves not only as deserving the punishment, but as the agent of our own misery.

At the climax of the story, Yaakov's sons will realize in an instant that had they not sold their brother Yosef, none of the unpleasantness they endured for many months would ever have occurred. The connection between all the unhappy events became clear. Had the mysterious and harsh viceroy of Egypt not been the Yosef they sold, they would not have been accused of being spies. They would not have been challenged by the ruler to return home and bring their youngest brother back with them. The episode of the purloined cup would not have taken place. Neither would the trouble over the money planted in their knapsacks.

That later clarity contrasts with their reaction now, which seems to ironic to us, who know what Yosef is really up to. At this point, however, the brothers are overwhelmed. When first accused of being spies, they could at least make sense of the allegation. They had acted somewhat strangely. Many a neutral observer would have become suspicious upon learning that members of one family all entered the city by taking a different route. Concluding that they were spying out the city was not absurd. But finding money in each of their knapsacks - what other explanation could there be, other than that they were marked men, being framed for a crime they did not commit. At this point, all they can do is feel crushed by the hand of G-d that has acted against them. It is Him they blame, so to

speak. The moment of clarity had still not arrived when they would understand the interrelationship of all the events they had experienced. When that happened, when Yosef revealed himself to them, they no longer had to look to Hashem for the cause of their suffering. They realized how they had directly brought it all upon themselves.

A famous midrash⁴ reacts to the shame of the shevatim as Yosef reveals himself to them. "The brothers could not respond to him, because they were shamed." Abba, the kohein of Bardela, put it pithily, "Woe unto us for the day of judgment! Woe unto us for the day of rebuke." Bilam had difficulty hearing the rebuke of his she-donkey; the shevatim melted before the rebuke of their younger brother. Imagine the shame, he continues, when each person is admonished by Hashem Himself at his moment of judgment, each person "according to what he is."

That last phrase, "according to what he is," troubled many of the commentators. We could explain it according to the approach we have taken. Not only will Hashem point to our many faults and sins, but He will show how they were the direct cause of the difficulties that confronted us in life, in the same way that Yosef made his brothers recognize that all the pain they had endured flowed directly from their sin in selling him. Similarly, Bilam had been furious at his animal for veering off the path. When the angel revealed himself, Bilam understood that it was his own sin that brought the angel to block his progress, and cause the donkey to turn from the middle of the road. He then realized that he was the cause of his distress, not the donkey. Each person's suffering and tribulations are "according to what he is" - according to the chains of events his own actions unleashed.

This is what Abba, koheun of Bardela had in mind in speaking of the day of judgment and the day of rebuke. Judgment refers to the pain and suffering a person endures because of his misdeeds. They become even more unbearable when a person realizes that he, and he alone, brought that pain and suffering upon himself as direct consequences of those misdeeds. This realization is the "rebuke" to which Abba refers.

Demonstrating to a person that he is responsible for all that went wrong in his life, and that caused him untold grief, is an enormously powerful form of reprimand.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Miketz 42:28
 2. Taanis 9A
 3. Mishlei 19:3
 4. Bereishis Rabbah 93:10
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