

# WHAT A PITY!

*by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

It was not an easy decision, but the brothers felt that they came to it in an honest and fair manner. Yosef was a rebel and had no place in the family. Death was not the final answer, as the brothers decided that his rebellion against them was not worthy of capital punishment just permanent banishment from their ranks. And so he was sold as a slave. Hashem, however, had different plans. Years later, it was they who were on the hot seat sitting before a disguised Yosef, viceroy of Egypt, who accused them all of spying.. "The only way I will believe you is if you bring your youngest brother Benjamin here to me." Then he imprisoned Shimon as a hostage. At that point, the brothers realized that this ludicrous accusation was more than a mortal vagary. It must be Divine retribution. "But we are guilty concerning our brother, when we saw his his soulful anguish as he pleaded to us, and we did not listen; that is why this anguish comes upon us" (Genesis 42:21).

Reuven, the eldest of the brothers, admonishes them by adding a seemingly redundant statement. "Did I not speak to you saying, 'do not sin against the boy! But you did not listen, and now his blood as well behold is being avenged!" (Genesis 42:22). What is the meaning of this regretful enunciation? Didn't the brothers say the same thing? What did the brothers regret, and what did Reuven add?

The story is told that a poor widow holding a chicken came running to her Rav one Friday morning. "Rebbe," she cried "for the last two weeks I saved enough money to buy this chicken which I just had slaughtered this morning in honor of the Shabbos. After it was slaughtered, the shochet looked at it and said that there is a problem with it. Is it kosher?" The Rav looked at the chicken and frowned; according to the opinion of the Shach, one of the most prominent commentaries of the Shulchan Oruch, the chicken was not kosher. However, the Rav looked up at the tear-stricken face of the widow and looked again very carefully at the chicken. He remembered that there were some opinions of other, not-so-famous authorities which ruled more leniently.

The Rav decided to employ the more lenient ruling and told the woman that the chicken was kosher. "Go home and enjoy it with your family!" The woman left the Rabbi, tears of joy streaming down her face.

Later, the Rav told his students, "When I come to heaven, I am not afraid to face the wrath of the Shach, against whom I employed a leniency. I am afraid, however, to face the wrath of the old widow whom I would have ruled against and forced her family to go hungry."

Many commentators explain that even the terrible misfortune that transpired to Yosef's brothers did

not inspire the brothers to regret the actual sale. They felt that the sale of Yosef, approved by the brothers as a Bais Din, was within the parameters of justice.

But the misfortune and false accusations did cause them to realize that there was one ingredient in the transaction and in their sentence that was missing. And that was compassion. They meted justice but did not respond to the soulful anguish as Yosef pleaded to save his soul. Reuven, on the other hand, felt that the entire sale in itself was misguided and thus chided his brothers on it. On that the brothers felt they were justified. When Yaakov is told the story of the accusatory ruler, he blesses his sons that when they return to the viceroy, "may Almighty G-d grant you mercy before the man that he may return your other brother (Shimon) as well as Binyomin" (Genesis 43:14).

Yaakov understood quite well that compassion may change a verdict of the harshest order. And the brothers, regretting their indifference, now understood the same.

Often, when faced with the challenge of justice, we do what is technically correct. The question we must ask ourselves is where do we stand when our brother pleads? Good Shabbos ©1999 Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

*Dedicated by Ben and Beth Heller in memory of Sidney Turkel*

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