

# TYING G-D'S HANDS

by Nechama Stampler

## Tying G-d's Hands<sup>1</sup>?

*My son's tunic! A savage animal devoured him!*

Rashi: Ruach ha-kodesh flickered within him in uttering these words. He foretold that an evil animal - Potiphar's wife - would try to consume him. Why did Hashem not reveal to Yaakov the truth of what happened to Yosef? Because the shevatim imposed a cherem, and cursed all who would reveal what had happened. They included Hashem together with themselves.

What did the shevatim hope to accomplish by including Hashem in their cherem? How could they possibly have thought that they would somehow force G-d, as it were, to do their bidding? Why would they believe that their cherem would hold sway over Hashem, somehow compelling His silence regarding the circumstances of Yosef's sale?

It is possible that it was not so much the cherem they believed would work. Rather, they thoroughly believed that Hashem's Will coincided with the effect of the cherem, which was to keep the dark secret from Yaakov. They understood that if Yaakov learned the truth about how they had treated them, he might curse them. Such a curse, coming from Yaakov the tzadik, might very well be effective, just as the tefilah and berachah of a tzadik are especially potent. Were Yaakov to curse his sons, the future of the Jewish people would be sorely jeopardized. The shevatim understood that they were to be the foundation of the Torah nation. Moreover they understood this to be the Divine Will. As such, Hashem Himself had an interest, so to speak, in precluding Yaakov's curse of his sons. Knowing this, they sought to solidify their cherem. Since their objective and the Divine Mind coincided in a common interest, they believed that Hashem would honor their cherem.

What difference would a cherem make? Either Hashem would agree to keep the facts from Yaakov or He wouldn't! Know this. HKBH grants enormous power to prayer. Tefilah can change, as it were, the Divine plan for things. Chazal teach us that even a gezerah, an edict from Heaven that has already been formulated, can be rescinded through davening.

Yet, there are limits and exceptions. Chazal speak of "oaths" taken by Hashem that preclude any change in Divine edicts. Similarly, Divine acquiescence to a cherem would concretize a Heavenly decision, preventing any further change. The shevatim hoped that by agreeing to their cherem, He would close the door on any possibility that Yaakov's earnest prayer might change Hashem's plan.

Hashem's agreeing to the cherem would block the efficacy of Yaakov's future davening to find out what had occurred to Yosef on that fateful day. Thus, their secret would be preserved.

This reconstruction leaves room for the efficacy of the cherem - but only because it enshrined in law what Hashem already wanted. If it is true, we must ask why Rashi believed that the cherem played any role whatsoever! Perhaps Hashem kept Yaakov from learning the truth because it was His Will that he not find out! Perhaps G-d indeed did not wish to upset the plan for the shevatim to become the foundational generation of the Jewish collective!

We can show that this is not the case. Yaakov came close to discovering the truth, through this upwelling of ruach hakodesh that Rashi describes. This means that Yaakov received extraordinary Divine assistance, which stopped short of its original intent, which was to clue him in on the truth. If HKBH had firmly resolved on His own that Yaakov would not discover the truth, He would not have assisted him in coming close to stumbling upon it! In fact, however, Yaakov did come close, which shows that there was room for him to tease the truth from Hashem through fervent tefilah. That tefilah fell short of its objective only because Hashem honored the countervailing cherem of the shevatim.

The Maharik<sup>[2]</sup> comes close to this. He finds a different reason, however, for Hashem to willingly subjugate Himself to the cherem-enforced agreement of the shevatim. Yaakov absented himself from his parents for twenty-two years. Yaakov was owed a measure of Divine retribution for this shortcoming. Midas ha-din called for twenty-two years in which Yaakov would be separated from his own beloved son. For this to occur, Yaakov would have to be kept uninformed of Yosef's whereabouts.

Our approach is superior. Maharik may be correct, but the shevatim surely would not have known about such a Divine bookkeeping! They had no reason to suspect that Yaakov was to be punished, measure for measure, for this twenty-two year lapse in kibud av v'eim. The Maharik's approach therefore does not explain what the shevatim hoped to achieve with their cherem.

All our discussion so far is academic. Chazal clearly had something else in mind. They teach<sup>[3]</sup> that Hashem was included in the cherem only because they needed Him for a minyan! Because Reuvain was not part of the council that sold Yosef into slavery, there were only nine on hand to participate in their cherem. The shevatim called upon Hashem to join them in formulating the cherem - not in being bound by it! They asked Him to partner with them, not to limit Himself to their authority.

This is not strange at all. Hashem indeed "partners" with all of us, because we all have a portion and stake in Him. Through the connection we have with the Divine, we can make Him at times to be part of our activity. He is called Makom - the place of the world. This Name connotes filling out the totality, being the collective that includes everything. When the shevatim attempted to act as a collective and found themselves to be one short of the requisite number of ten, they could count on this aspect of Hashem's being to substitute for the missing member of the set.

Following this approach, Hashem abided by the cherem not because it laid any claim upon Him, but because He decided to honor a cherem that had been properly formulated by an important and respected collective: the beis din of the shevatim.

We can still question Rashi's conclusion. What evidence does Rashi have that the cherem played any role in Hashem's conduct. Perhaps He withheld information from Yaakov because it was necessary for Yosef to remain in Egypt, eventually luring the rest of the family? Hashem had earlier foretold<sup>[4]</sup> that the Bnei Yisrael would be exiled in Egypt. Yosef was the one who would draw them all there. For this to happen, his story had to remain hidden.

The answer to this objection is quite simple. Were it only a matter of bringing about galus Mitzrayim, Yaakov could have been told the truth about Yosef at the end of the twenty-two years, after Yaakov's entire clan left Canaan for Egypt. He was kept in the dark only because of the cherem.

One problem remains. If this analysis is accurate, Rashi should not have spoken of the shevatim including Hashem in their cherem. Rather, he should have spoken of Hashem honoring the cherem, once it had been made by them. His role in the cherem seems irrelevant.

What Rashi means, perhaps, is that the shevatim would not have thought or asked Hashem to respect their cherem had they not relied upon Him in the first place to complete the number ten to validate it. Because they "partnered" with Him in creating the cherem, they believed that there was a good chance that He would abide by it.

1. *Based on Gur Aryeh, Bereishis 37:33*
  2. Shut Maharik 37:3
  3. Tanchuma Vayeishev 2
  4. Bereishis 46:2
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