

HAFTORAH COMMENTARY PARSHAS VAYEISHEV

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

Amos 2:6 - 3:8

This week's haftorah sensitizes us to the severity of injustice. The prophet Amos begins by informing us of the limits of Hashem's tolerance. Hashem says, "I can be patient over the three offenses of the Jewish people, but the fourth is inexcusable. Namely, the sale of the righteous for silver and the pauper for shoes. They anticipate the dirt placed on the head of the impoverished." (2:6, 7) Amos admonishes the Jewish people here for their insensitivity towards injustice. He complains about the judges who would bend the law for nominal sums and exchange justice for an inexpensive pair of shoes. They would discriminate against the poor and even drag the impoverished through the dirt when they refused to comply with their unjustified sentence. Over these Hashem expresses serious disturbance and declares them unforgivable.

The Radak, in explanation of the above passages, magnifies this disturbance and interprets the three offenses mentioned here to be the three cardinal sins - idolatry, incest and murder. Hashem explains that the most cardinal sins do not receive an immediate response from Above. For these Hashem is somewhat patient and allows the offender the opportunity to repent and correct his outrageous behavior. But the injustice shown to the poor evokes Hashem's immediate response. Rabbeinu Bachya (see introduction to our Parsha) explains the basis for this and reminds us that the poor place their total trust in Hashem. Their financial resources do not command any respect or assistance from others which forces them to place their total trust in Hashem. Therefore, Hashem pledges to come immediately to their defense and responds harshly to any injustice done to them.

The Pirkei D'Reb Eliezer (Chapter 38) sees in the above passages a reference to the infamous sale of Yoseif Hatzaddik by his brothers, the tribes of Israel. Chazal explain that the brothers sold Yoseif for the equivalent of twenty silver dollars and that each brother purchased a pair of shoes with his portion of the money, two silver dollars. According to R' Eliezer, this is the incident Amos refers to when reprimanding the Jewish people for selling the righteous for silver and the pauper for shoes. The prophet tells us that this sin was unforgivable and was viewed with greater severity than every cardinal offense. With this statement the prophet alludes to the fact that the greatest scholars of Israel, the ten holy martyrs would be brutally murdered in atonement for this sin. Hashem said that the sale of Yoseif, unlike all other sins, could never be overlooked and that one day the greatest Tannaim (Mishnaic authors) would suffer inhuman torture and be taken from us in atonement for this sin. No offense of the Jewish people ever evoked a response so harsh as this one and the torturous

death of the ten martyrs remains the most tragic personal event in all of Jewish history.

This week's haftorah shares with us an important perspective regarding the offense of Yoseif's sale by focusing on a particular aspect of the offense. As we glean from the prophet's words it was not the actual sale that aroused Hashem's wrath, rather the condition of the sale. Amos refers to the indignity shown to Yoseif and the insensitivity towards his feelings, being sold for an inexpensive pair of shoes. When lamenting the ten martyrs during the liturgy in the Yom Kippur service we accent this dimension and recount that the wicked Roman ruler filled the entire courtroom with shoes. This was his fiendish way of reminding the martyrs about their indignant behavior and insensitivity towards their brother.

The upshot of this is that there was some room to justify the actual sale of Yoseif. The Sforno (37:18) explains that the brothers truly perceived that their life was in serious danger as long as Yoseif remained in their surroundings. After closely following his actions and anticipating the outcome of his inexcusable attitude and behavior the brothers found it necessary to protect themselves from his inevitable attack of them. Although they totally misread the entire situation from the start it can be argued that their precautionary measures were somewhat justified and permissible. However, Sforno draws our attention to their insensitivity during these trying moments. The brothers are quoted to have reflected on their decision and said, "But we are guilty for observing his pain when he pleaded with us and we turned a deaf ear to it." (Breishis 42:21) Even they faulted themselves for their insensitivity towards their brother. When he pleaded for his life they should have reconsidered and adjusted their harsh decision. It is this insensitivity that the prophet refers to when focusing upon the sale for shoes. Apparently, they purchased these shoes in exchange for Yoseif to indicate that he deserved to be reduced to dirt. Their statement reflected that whoever challenged their authority deserved to be leveled and reduced to nothing. (see Radal to Pirkei D'R'Eliezer)

This expression of indignation was inexcusable and required the most severe of responses. Hashem chose the illustrious era of the Tannaim to respond to this offense. During those times a quorum of prominent scholars presided over Israel which personified the lessons of brotherhood and sensitivity. An elite group was chosen for the task, including: the Prince of Israel, the High Priest and Rabbi Akiva who authored the statement, "Love your friend as yourself" is the fundamental principle of the Torah." In atonement for the inexcusable sale Hashem decreed upon these martyrs the most insensitive torturous death ever to be experienced. The Tzor Hamor (see Seder Hadoros year 3880) explains that the lesson this taught the Jewish people was eternal. After this horrifying experience the Jewish people were finally cleansed from all effects of the infamous offense done to Yoseif. From hereafter they could be authentically identified as a caring and sensitive people.

From this we learn how sensitive we must be and even when our harsh actions are justified we must exercise them with proper sensitivities. As difficult as the balance may be we must always feel for our Jewish brethren and show them the proper dignity and compassion they truly deserve.

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