

WHO KNOWS ELEVEN?

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We read in this week's parashah of Yosef's dream in which he saw his eleven brothers as eleven stars. At the end of the Pesach Seder, we sing of these eleven stars: "Who knows `eleven'? I know `eleven'! `Eleven' are the stars." We mention these stars at the Seder to remind us, explains R' Elazar Shach shlita (the Ponovezh Rosh Hayeshiva), that even when the brothers sold Yosef, they remained as lofty as the stars. This is so because their act was based upon halachic reasoning and their understanding of how the Torah called upon them to react towards Yosef. Thus, when the brothers stood before Yosef almost 22 years later - before he revealed his identity to them, they were able to say to each other (42:21), "Indeed we are guilty concerning our brother inasmuch as we saw his heartfelt anguish when he pleaded with us and we paid no heed." They did not recriminate over their decision to sell, or even kill, Yosef, merely over the fact that they ignored his pleas for mercy.

From the time that the brothers sold Yosef until the time they stood before him in Egypt, 22 years passed - 22 Rosh Hashanahs, 22 Yom Kippurs, and 22 months of Elul, i.e., 22 seasons of repentance. Undoubtedly, the brothers constantly revisited their actions and searched themselves for any sin. The only sin that they could identify, the Torah implies, is that they did not answer Yosef's cries.

And yet, when Yosef revealed himself to the brothers (in the parashah read two weeks from now), when they heard the two words, "I'm Yosef," "They could not answer him, for they were shaken before him" (45:3). Why did Yosef's words have such an impact?

R' Shach explains that when the brothers engaged in introspection during those 22 years, Yosef was not before them. Literally or figuratively, his striped coat was before them, but they never saw Yosef as a person. Only when their brother declared "I am Yosef" did they first assess him as a person, rather than because of his outer trappings.

Chazal observe, "If Yosef's brothers could not withstand the two words, 'I am Yosef,' how will we withstand G-d's rebuke after we have lived our lives"? The brothers' mistake is a common one, R' Schach explains, except that we not only judge others, we judge ourselves superficially. What will be, however, when we stand before G-d without our outer trappings?!

(Haggadah Shel Pesach Avi Ezri).

An Astonishing Midrash

"What gain/betza shall we have if we kill our brother?" (37:26) - from here we see that Yosef's brothers prayed daily.

The word "betza" - spelled bet-tzaddi-ayin - is the acronym of "boker, tzaharayim, arrev"/"morning, afternoon, evening." These are, of course, the three times for prayer. Yehuda said to his brothers in the above verse: "What gain will we have if kill our brother? - our prayers will no longer be accepted!"

Why? Because the prophet Yeshayah states (1:15), "When you spread your hands [in prayer], I will hide My eyes from you; even if you intensify your prayer, I will not listen - your hands are full of blood." From here we learn that a murderer's prayers are not heard.

Besides alluding to the three prayer times, the three letters of "betza" allude to the three prayers in another way: the letter "bet" is the second letter of Avraham's name, the letter "tzaddi" is the second letter of Yitzchak's name, and the letter "ayin" is the second letter of Yaakov's name. These men were the innovators of the morning, afternoon and evening prayers, respectively.

(Binat Nevonim)

"His brothers said to him, 'Would you then reign over us? Would you then dominate us?' And they hated him even more because of his dreams and because of his talk.

He dreamt another dream . . . 'Behold! The sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.'

And he related it to his father and to his brothers; his father scolded him, and said to him, 'What is this dream that you have dreamt? Are we to come - I and your mother and your brothers - to bow to you to the ground?' So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind." (37:8-11)

What about the second dream made the brothers jealous of Yosef, while after the first dream they only hated him? R' Yosef Chaim of Baghdad z"l (died 1909) explains as follows:

The gemara (Berachot 54) teaches, "A good man does not see good dreams and a bad man does not see bad dreams." Taken literally, this is plainly not true; rather, the commentaries explain, a good man does not see a good dream unless it is destined to come true.

Regarding Yosef's dream, it clearly was a good dream (for Yosef). Yet, it was a dream that could not come true, for how can the celestial bodies bow to a human! Since Yosef had a "good" dream which could never be fulfilled, it must be, Yosef's brothers concluded, that Yosef was not a "good" person.

The brothers' conclusion was based upon a literal reading of the dream, but when Yaakov said, "Are we to come - I and your mother and your brothers - to bow to you to the ground?" the brothers realized that the dream was metaphorical. Understood that way, it could be fulfilled.

But could it? Would a father ever bow to his son? Verse 11 tells us, "So his brothers were jealous of him, [because] his father kept the matter in mind." Rashi writes that Yaakov waited in anticipation to see when the dream would be fulfilled. He, apparently, did not think that the dream would never be fulfilled, and this gave the brothers reason to be jealous.

(Od Yosef Chai)

The midrash summarizes this parashah as follows, "The brothers were busy selling Yosef, Reuven was busy repenting [see Rashi 37:29], Yehuda was busy taking a wife, and G-d was busy bringing the light of mashiach." R' Ben- Zion Halevi Bamberger z"l (20th century) elaborates:

This parashah clearly demonstrates how many different, seemingly unrelated, strands of history are all held tightly in G-d's hand, and how they come together to accomplish His purpose. Yaakov needed to be punished for the 22 years he was away from his parents and Yosef needed to be punished for speaking lashon hara about his brothers. Also, G-d had to fulfill the prophecy give to Avraham, "Your children will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs," and He had to fulfill Yosef's dreams. In addition, Yosef's descent to Egypt actually was the beginning of the redemption from there because he paved the way and made it easier for his brethren to survive there.

(Sha'arei Zion p.46)

"There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has denied me nothing but you, since you are his wife; how then can I perpetrate this great evil and [then I will] have sinned against G-d."
(39:9)

The above verse was Yosef's response to the wife of Potiphar, when she tried to seduce him. Ramban writes: Even non-Jews are commanded against adultery, except that because of her simple-mindedness, Yosef opened with a logical argument and only then said that it would also be a sin.

We learn from this, writes R' Elya Meir Bloch z"l (20th century) that even when a teacher must simplify matters for a student and bring them down to the student's level, he also should speak to the student on a higher level and tell him the "truth." Thus Yosef said to Potiphar's wife, "It would be a betrayal of my master to listen to you," - the simplified reason - "and it also would be wrong" - the true reason. Teaching the student the simplified lesson is not an end in itself, it only is a means to the end of teaching the student the "real" lesson.

(Peninei Da'at)

R' Yehuda ibn Balam z"l born approx. 1000 - died approx. 1070

R' Yehuda ben Shmuel ibn Balam was a Torah commentator whose interpretations were extremely popular with his contemporaries. He is quoted frequently by R' Avraham Ibn Ezra, who lists him among the fifteen "Elders of the Hebrew Tongue."

R' Yehuda's commentary, which has been lost, incorporated his own interpretations, many Talmudic and midrashic interpretations, and the views of other commentators, which he often refuted. In particular, R' Yehuda took issue with many views of his contemporary, R' Moshe ibn Gikatilla.

R' Yehuda also was an expert in Hebrew grammar, and he composed several works in that field. These included: Sefer Hapo'alim, Otot Ha'inyanim, Sefer Ha'meyasheir, and Sefer Hatzamid. In his later years, he composed liturgical poems, some of which have survived in the Sephardic and Italian selichot services. (Source: The Artscroll Rishonim p.65; Ohr Hachaim)

Regarding the name "ibn Balam"/"son of Balam," the bibliographic work Ohr Hachaim notes that this probably was a family name of unknown origin, and not the given name of one of R' Yehuda's ancestors. Since we read in Mishlei (10:7), "The name of the wicked shall rot," and Chazal derive from this that we should not name our children after wicked people, "Balam" could not be a Jewish given name. (Ohr Hachaim No. 971)

[Ed. Note: In fact, there could be a basis for using the name "Balam" (or "Bilam"), as follows: Where the gemara (Shabbat 12b) cites a sage by the name of "Shevna," the Tosfot discuss whether this is an error and should read "Shachna." Shevna, after all, was a traitor to the Jewish people! (See Yeshayah 22.) (In Hebrew, the names "Shevna" and "Shachna" differ by the small drop of ink which distinguishes the letter "vet" from the letter "kaf".)

However, the Tosafist R' Yitzchak observes that Tanach mentions both the wicked "Shevna" and another man of the same name. Just as we would not stop using the name Avraham if there were once an evil Avraham, so, too, we need not stop using the name Shevna, R' Yitzchak argues.

Based on R' Yitzchak's argument, perhaps the name "Bilam" or "Balam" also should not be disqualified from use. Besides being the name of the evil prophet of Moshe's time, it also is the name of a city in Eretz Yisrael. (See Divrei Hayamim I 6:55)]

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