

RECOGNITION IS IN THE MINDSET OF THE BEHOLDER

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Rav Yosi, the gemara tells us,^[2] found himself one day to be the most disliked person in Tzipori. He had given a *shiur* in the *beis medrash* about how visitors to the city of Sedom were brutalized. He included a description of the clever *modus operandi* of the evil inhabitants to relieve non-citizens of their goods. When well-to-do wayfarers came to town, the thieves would deposit fragrant balsam with them, which the unsuspecting visitors would keep wherever they secreted their valuables. At night, the thieves would literally sniff out the the valuables through the scent of the balsam, and help themselves to them.

That night, continues the gemara, thieves burrowed three hundred tunnels in Tzipori, robbing householders of their most prized possessions.

The victims angrily accosted R. Yosi. "How could I have known that the thieves would attend my *shiur*?" The gemara concludes with an unusual postscript that seems to be a complete non-sequitur:

When R. Yosi died, the walls^[3] of Tzipori poured forth blood.

On one level, the passage offers social commentary on an anomaly that has not disappeared. In order for the Sodomite ruse to work in Tzipori, two things had to take place. Firstly, the rich victims had to have been elsewhere at the time of the *shiur* – but not in the *beis medrash*. Secondly, the regulars at the *beis medrash* – including the ones who stayed for the *shiur* – must have included a substantial number of crooks! This was the gist of R. Yosi's answer to the irate citizens of Tzipori! "Could I have known that *ganavim* are the regular attendees in our *minyán*, while the honored notables stay home?"

Deeper meaning, however, awaits us in this passage. Let's look at the puzzling conclusion.

Chazal tell us^[4] that *tzadikim* are greater after death than in life. Why is it, though, that whatever accomplishments and greatness that people find in a person only after his demise were not noticed during his lifetime? One explanation is that we appreciate people only within a context. While a person lives among us, countervailing factors skew how we perceive them.

One factor is jealousy. Why do others have what we could have had just as easily? Why them and not us? We are jealous of others, however, only when we perceive them to be active competitors – but not after death.

A second factor is hatred. A *tzadik* most often assumes a public role. This means that he will often have to admonish wrongdoers. Some of those will hate him for it. He will sit on a *beis din* – and some litigants will lose, even as they remain convinced that their claims are just. The court that *paskens* against them is then excoriated as ignorant or corrupt. As the jealousy and the animosity cease after the *tzadik*'s death, it is as if a veil of negativity lifts, and his sterling qualities become visible for the first time.

So it was with R. Yosi. As a Torah leader in Tzipori, he had on many occasions taken positions that angered people, including important people. Those who bore a grudge against him spared him no criticism, and spoke of him in ways that diminished his stature in the eyes of the citizens of his city. But when R. Yosi passed away, jealousy and hatred no longer stood in the way of a fuller appreciation of his greatness. The people saw R. Yosi's blood oozing from the walls of the city! In other words, the walls, the structure of the Tzipori community owed their integrity to the blood that R. Yosi had sunk into them. All his efforts, all his strength, had gone in to strengthening and maintaining their community.

We see a similar dynamic in regard to Yosef. The Torah tells us^[5] that while Yosef recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. R. Chisda explains^[6] that they failed to recognize him because when they last saw him he did not yet have a beard. R. Levi,^[7] however, approaches the *pasuk* very differently. He reads it as, "He recognized them when they fell into his hand, although they had not recognized Yosef when he fell into their hands." What could this mean? They recognized Yosef all too well when he checked on them at his father's request on that fateful day!

The two approaches, we will argue, do not oppose each other. In fact, one cannot be understood without the other. If a young person from a family of uneducated, menial workers leaves town and returns decades later as an aging menial worker, people will recognize them. He may have grown a beard in the interim, and it may have turned white, but people will look at him and be able to recognize the young man they once knew.

Should that same person return to town as a cultured aristocrat, people will not make the association. The change in his physical features, coupled with a radical shift in his life-station will suffice to prevent people from seeing any resemblance.

The special closeness that Yaakov evidenced with Yosef cascaded into tragic consequences in the relationship with his brothers. Had they realized that Yaakov's special treatment of Yosef was an artifact of his birth position, they would not have been jealous. Birth order doesn't say anything about a person's essence. They, however, thought that Yaakov somehow implied that Yosef was better, or more accomplished, than they. That led to potent jealousy – which then led to hatred. Jealousy and hatred, as we said before, cloud perception. When they threw Yosef into the pit, they saw a young person of diminished worth, who preened over his good looks. They detected none of his greatness,

and saw only his faults. He was not, in their eyes, anyone who would ever accomplish anything. When they later regretted their behavior and set out to search for him while in Egypt, they looked for him in the "prostitutes' quarter."^[8]

They did not expect to find him in a high position in Pharaoh's court. Had his features not changed at all in the many years of absence, they would have recognized him nonetheless. But the growth of the beard sufficed to block the recognition. This is what R. Levi meant. Why did a small thing like the growth of a beard stop all the brothers from recognizing Yosef? Because when they last saw him, they failed to recognize his true worth. When they met Pharaoh's viceroy, each one of the brothers dismissed the glint of familiarity they saw. Seeing Yosef as the power behind the throne was just too incongruous, given their assessment of him; their minds completely shut down that possibility. Their understanding of him, however, was warped by the jealousy and hatred they had felt so many years earlier, even though it had long receded.

Much of the strife in our community owes to distorted images of people we hold before our minds' eye. Were it not for our own vices, we would have recognized their potential and promise while they were still "in our hand," and greet their later success with delight rather than derision.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh by R. Yechezkel Libshitz, Miketz.
2. Sanhedrin 109A.
3. R. Libshitz quotes the word כתלי, walls. In our gemaros, the word is מרזבי, rain gutters.
4. Chulin 7B.
5. Bereishis 42:8.
6. Bava Metzia 39B.
7. Yalkut Shimoni, Miketz, #148.
8. Bereishis Rabbah 91:6.