

PARSHAS VAYEISHEV - FOOD FOR BASE THOUGHT

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Food For Base Thought¹

His brothers went to tend their father's sheep in Shechem.

Why do we need to learn about the identity of the sheep? What is important to the story is that all the brothers left together for Shechem, leaving Yosef behind. Could it have made any difference if they went to Shechem to tend to their own sheep?

The Torah must be telling us that they took liberties on this occasion with their father's sheep. They helped themselves to some meals from the flocks they shepherded. This was not a major shortcoming, but by the letter of the law it was not something they were allowed to do without permission. Failing to secure that permission was a small sin. The Torah makes us painfully aware that one aveirah leads to another. Even in the case of great people, the commission of a small aveirah can lead to sins far greater - in this case, the sale of Yosef.

We have thus accounted for a plain-sense reading of the pasuk. Going beyond that, we detect even more subtlety. The word *es* is adorned with points over each letter. From this Chazal derive that what they were shepherding, more than anyone's sheep, was themselves. Apparently this means that they traveled with the intention of making it somewhat of a pleasure trip. They used the opportunity for a bit of feasting.

What could this mean? Is there anything inherently good or bad in an afternoon barbeque?

The gemara^[2] declares that when Mikra speaks of someone "enticing" another, it is always accomplished through food and beverage. The gemara then objects, citing a pasuk^[3] in which HKBH Himself speaks of being "enticed," as it were by Soton. Surely whatever it was that "convinced" Hashem to target Iyov, it did not involve a few cocktails and munchies! Clearly, enticing does not necessarily involve food and drink.

The gemara answers that the two kinds of enticing can simply not be compared. Whatever it means in the context of Hashem's decision-making, Heavenly enticement does not and cannot involve food. Seducing mortal human beings to act contrary to their usual judgment is linked to enjoying food.

These lines of gemara seem incomprehensible. Whoever asked the question from the verse in Iyov was certainly aware of the incompatibility of eating - or any physical activity - with G-d. That was precisely his point. Hashem speaks of His being enticed, even though no food or drink was involved. Q.E.D. What better proof that enticement is not bound up with the practice of eating? What, then, was the gemara's answer?

Here is the explanation. Enticing means changing a person's mind, leaving him eager to do something improper. This does not happen unless his discernment is dulled, his vision obscured, the power of his judgment weakened. Eating and drinking will do that - leaving him in whole or in part intoxicated or simply mentally lethargic and inefficient. They provide the opening for behavior inconsistent with that person's ordinary way of thinking.

The gemara objects that Hashem is described as being enticed, and yet He does not eat or drink. The gemara answers that genuine enticement does require food or drink as a lubricant. HKBH, however, is never "enticed" at all.

HKBH's treatment of Iyov seems unjust. In fact, a person ordinarily would not be treated as he was without some reason for midas hadin/ Hashem's attribute of justice to take its toll. But Iyov was blameless, and would not have been subjected to his fate were Hashem's usual rules in effect.

They weren't. We don't really know why. In human terms - treating the situation as we would if we were dealing with a flesh-and-blood king - Hashem was "enticed" by the Soton to make an exception on this occasion. Real enticement, however, does require a catalyst to make it happen.

In our parshah, the meaning of this is clear. The shevatim were utterly convinced that their judgment of their brother was correct. They adjudged him to have ceded his right to live. In fact, this judgment was in error. Great people would not have arrived at such a faulty conclusion without some interference with their thinking. Their thinking was "off," and that deficit in rational processing applied to all of them that day.

How did this come to pass? Our pasuk sets the stage for the tragedy that followed. Hashgacha had it that this was the day they chose for a bit of diversion, for a stronger measure of self-indulgence than they ordinarily treated themselves to. This was the day that they shepherded not only their flocks, but tended to their own needs as well. They were minimally prepared for any moral and intellectual challenges, having lost some of their power to the effects of physical indulgence.

The upshot of our pasuk is a tribute to the greatness of the shevatim. They could not have committed the wrong that they did, had Hashem not artificially set the stage for it. He created their vulnerability, by leading them to behave in a manner that is innocuous in and of itself, but devastating to those who need particularly acute thinking to escape a wrong and tragic conclusion.

1. Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Bereishis 37:12

2. Chulin 4B

3. Iyov 2:3
