

RUBLE TROUBLE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Vayigash begins with the brother's - with Yehuda acting as their spokesman - embittered plea for the release of their brother Binyamin.

"Therefore," Yehuda pleads, "please allow your servant [Yehuda] to remain instead of the youth [Binyamin] as a slave to my master, and let the lad return with his brothers. For how can I go up to my father if the youth is not with me - lest I witness the adversity that will befall my father! (44:33-34)"

Yosef, the viceroy of Egypt, who had until this point been going through elaborate machinations in order to conceal his true identity, while at the same time putting his brothers through what must have been one of the most befuddling and troublesome ordeal of their lives, suddenly decided that the time had come to reveal himself to them.

"Remove everyone from before me!" he cried out. "And no one remained present when Yosef revealed himself to his brothers." (45:1)

As one learns through the Chumash, one can not help questioning Yosef's actions. Mefarshim (commentators) explain that he did not reveal himself immediately to his brothers because he had seen in his prophetic dream that all eleven of his brothers would bow down to him; thus he knew that he must succeed in bringing Binyamin to Egypt before he could divulge his secret. Binyamin had indeed come, bowed down, and been sent off, all without Yosef revealing himself, only to be dragged back to Egypt under false accusations. Now, as his brother Yehuda stands and pleads for his release, Yosef finally relents and reveals his true identity.

What were Yosef's motives? Why could he not have revealed himself to the brothers earlier? What had suddenly changed that now permitted him to let down his veil?

Reb Noach, a disciple of the holy Rebbe of Apta (the "Ohev Yisrael"), had once been a wealthy and successful merchant. Now, as he dejectedly stood before his Rebbe, he was broke. "All I have left," he tearfully told the tzaddik, "is one ruble - the last reminder of my better days. And my daughter has reached marriageable age, yet I have nothing with which to marry her off!"

"Tell me," said the Ohev Yisrael, "how much does a man like you need for a dowry and wedding expenses, so that you can marry-off your daughter respectfully?"

Reb Noach sighed from the depths of his heart. "One thousand rubles, holy Rebbe."

"And how much do you have?" asked the tzaddik

"I already told the Rebbe - I have but one ruble left from all my years of hard work!"

"Fine," said the tzaddik, "it is enough! Hashem's blessing can rest upon one ruble just as well as a larger amount. Go in peace, and accept the first business offer that comes your way. And remember: Yeshuas Hashem ke-heref ayin, Hashem's salvation comes in the blink of an eye!"

Not long afterwards, as he travelled home, Reb Noach stopped over in an inn to rest his aching feet. Though the food being served made his mouth water, he could hardly spend his last ruble on it, and preferred instead to partake of the stale bread he carried in his sack. Some well-to-do merchants sat next to him enjoying a sumptuous meal. Noticing the raggedly dressed pauper sitting next to them, they decided to amuse themselves. "Tell me, my fellow Jew," one of them said, "you have the appearance of a merchant. Perhaps you would be interested in a business proposition?!"

Startled, Reb Noach suddenly remembered the tzaddik's words. "Yes!" he replied enthusiastically.

"And how much money do you have at your disposal?" they asked. "One ruble!" Reb Noach replied without hesitation.

"One whole ruble!" they mocked. "Let's see what kind of a deal we can strike with a wealthy merchant who possesses one whole ruble. Reb Yid, I am sure," one of the merchants piped-in, "that for one ruble you could do no better than to purchase my share in the World to Come! Do we have a deal - your one ruble for my Olam Ha-Ba?!"

'The first business offer,' reb Noach reminded himself of his Rebbe's words. "Yes," he responded, "I will do it." Eager to prolong their amusement, the merchants went about arranging the writing of a legal contract, and the deal was done.

The wealthy merchants were still basking in their revelry when the wife of the merchant who had made the sale entered the room. Seeing her husband's face red with laughter, she now wished to know what was going on. Priding himself on his cleverness and wit, he related to her exactly what had happened. By the time he finished his story to the laughter of his peers, however, his face had turned ashen white. He could tell by the deathly serious expression of his wife, and by her blazing eyes, that his idea of fun pleased her not the least. Nor could he do as he please, for his wife was the daughter of a wealthy merchant, and everything he had was ultimately her's.

A tense silence now came over the once-merry group. All at once, the woman began pouring out her wrath at her husband in front of the entire crowd - the empty-headed yokel who could find nothing better to do than to give-away his insignificant portion in Olam Ha-Ba! "You fool!" she cried, "How does a Jew dare to make sport of the most important thing he possesses! Take me to the Rav immediately - I refuse to be married to an imbecile like you who is so disconnected from Yiddishkeit that he does not even have a share in the World to Come!"

Overwhelmed with shame, the merchant realized that his only hope was to buy back his portion. Reb Noach was searched for, found, and brought back to their table. "Hey, Reb Yid," called out one of the

merchants, "cute joke you played on our friend! Now give him back his share in the World to Come!"

Noticing the merchant's hysterical wife standing over him, Reb Noach began to grasp what had occurred. Slowly, he spoke up. "Honored gentlemen," he began in a composed voice, "I ask all of you here to bear witness to the fact that the transaction between myself and the merchant was no joke nor prank. Indeed, I have the contract to show for it. That is not to say, however, that for the right price I would not be willing to relinquish my purchase and give him back his share in the World to Come..."

The merchant pleaded with Reb Noach to sell it back to him; he would even pay him fifty rubles - a five-thousand percent profit - if only he would relent. But Reb Noach was adamant - one thousand rubles was his price, not one ruble less. "Understand, honored merchant," said Reb Noach, "that I was once a highly respected and successful merchant. Then one day, the wheel turned, and I lost all my money. This is how I fell into the state in which you now find me. Just recently, when I could not gather a sum sufficient for a dowry for my daughter, and other wedding expenses, I travelled to the holy tzaddik, the Ohev Yisrael, to ask for his advice. It was he who instructed me to accept the first business offer that came my way. It is clear to me that Hashem has guided my steps and brought me here - and that the money for my daughter's wedding lies with you."

The couple could not speak. Tears welled up in the merchant's eyes, although ostensibly he had never before experienced such emotions. Without hesitation, he withdrew a fold of bills from his pocket, and counted out one thousand rubles into the hands of Reb Noach. The merchant took the contract from Reb Noach, and tore it into shreds. "Even without this contract," he said, "it is worth investing a thousand rubles for the mitzvah of hachnassas kallah (providing for a bride)!"

His wife, who had been standing at his side the entire time, glanced at him in amazement. She was prepared to swear that in all his life, this was the first time that such selfless and noble thoughts had ever entered his mind.

"I wish to meet the tzaddik that blessed you," the merchant's wife said to Reb Noach. "Perhaps we too will merit receiving his blessing." Reb Noach could not refuse, and together they made their way back to the Rebbe. The tzaddik received his visitors with a shining countenance; he had already known of the rich merchant's noble deed, and bestowed the couple with many blessings.

Before they left, the merchant's wife turned to the tzaddik and said, "Holy Rebbe, there is one thing I would like to know: Is my husband's portion in Olam Ha-Ba really worth the thousand rubles he paid for it?"

"If the truth be told," he said, "at first, when he sold it, it was not even worth the one ruble he received for it. But now, that he has merited giving one thousand rubles for the mitzvah of hachnassas kallah, its value is so great that it is impossible to estimate!" [Adapted from A Share in the World to Come, Menachem Gerlitz, HaModia Vayeichi 5759]

Sometimes, one doesn't fully grasp the true value of what he has until it is taken from him, and he is forced to fend for it in order to get it back. Only then does he truly appreciate what he has lost. If, in the end, he succeeds in re-acquiring that which he squandered, it takes on greater meaning than it ever would have had he never lost it in the first place.

Perhaps this can help us understand Yosef's motives. Yosef knew that his brother's had done teshuvah and repented for their having sold him. Yet he knew that in order for them to fully appreciate their sin - having sold their own brother into slavery - they would have to go through the same ordeal again, this time battling to regain that which had been taken from them. When Yosef saw their anguish and burning desire to get Binyamin back, he understood that their teshuvah was now complete, and wasted no time in revealing himself to them.

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