

# HOW CAN I PAY YOU BACK?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

## Yosef to His Brothers - How Can I Pay You Back?

After Yaakov's death it seems that the brothers feared there may be some unfinished business between Yosef and themselves. Perhaps Yosef had restrained himself from taking revenge over their selling him into slavery out of respect for their father, and had patiently waited until he died before settling their outstanding debt. With this in mind, they approached him and begged his forgiveness. Yosef assured them he had no such plans:

*But Yosef said to them, "Fear not, for am I in place of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d made things work out well - in order to accomplish that a vast nation be kept alive! So now, fear not... Thus he comforted them, and spoke to their heart." [50:19-21]*

What did Yosef mean with the enigmatic words, "For am I in place of G- d?" It seems as if he is saying to his brothers, "Listen, as far as I'm concerned, everything's worked out fine. But don't forget you still have the Almighty to deal with!" If so, his words hardly seem like "words of comfort that speak to the heart."

Napoleon and his powerful French Army were in the midst of a raging campaign against Russia. To this point, his army had experienced tremendous success, yet it seemed now that their backs were up against a wall. The bitter-cold Russian winter had taken its toll; his soldiers were tired and frustrated. They had spent the past few weeks besieging a powerful Russian stronghold, yet there were no signs that the Russians were nearing surrender. How much longer could the Russians bear the siege, cut off as they were from almost any contact with the outside world? Yet Napoleon's soldiers too had just about had enough. Some of his senior officers approached him. "The time has come for decisive action," they said. "Either we mount an assault, or we give up and retreat. Our soldiers are not used to the frigid conditions, and it's only a matter of time before they will become an easy target for counter- attack."

Napoleon tried desperately to alleviate his soldiers' fears. "It can't be - they must be at wit's end! It's a matter of days."

They weren't convinced. "Who's to know? Perhaps they anticipated our attack, and have supplies for weeks or even months. By then we will have died from the cold."

Napoleon came up with a plan. He, along with one army officer, would enter the Russian city

disguised as Russian peasants. They would spy out the city, ascertaining both the perspective of its dwellers, as well as the possibility of a surprise attack.

The next evening, they entered the city under the cover of darkness, and found their way to a pub. To their luck, the pub was frequented by Russian soldiers who were by that stage none too sober. They sat down at a small table and pretend to chat while in fact they carefully listened to the soldiers' lively banter. It seemed the Russians were just about ready to surrender. In the city, mass hunger prevailed, and only the sparsest of supplies was making its way through. The townsfolk were sick of being puppets to the military, and most of the soldiers were also tired of the siege, from which they felt there was no realistic resolution, especially since their arms were at a minimum. Napoleon was greatly relieved to hear their words. He and his officer had heard what they came to hear, and there was certainly no point in overstaying their welcome. They began to prepare to leave.

Suddenly, one of the Russian soldiers, who had once visited France, thought he noticed something familiar. That peasant over there - he looked strangely familiar. Why, he looked like Bonaparte himself. The more he looked, the more sure he became. Even in his drunkenness, there was no mistaking it - that was Napoleon! He turned to his friends and apprised them of his discovery. "Do you see that peasant over there, the short one - it's Napoleon - I'm sure of it! Trust me, I've seen him once before." His friends were none too impressed with his discovery. "I'm telling you, as sure as vodka is good, that's him. Quick, let's grab him! We will bring him to the general."

Luckily for Napoleon, his friends were not easily convinced. "How could it be Napoleon?" they said. "How could he not fear to enter the city of his enemies like this? And anyways, he would never dress like that - in peasant's clothing!"

Their gestures and gesticulations had not escaped Napoleon's eagle-eyes. He had a very good idea of what was going on, and he was terrified. He felt his very life flash before his eyes. He motioned to his officer, who immediately understood his concerns. The officer turned and said loudly to Napoleon, "Ivan, go get me another beer - I'm still thirsty." Understanding the officer's intentions, Napoleon got up, and went demurely to the bar to get his "superior" another drink. As he returned to their table, he made as if he slipped, spilling the beer onto the table and into the lap of the officer. "You buffoon!" the officer cried. "Look what you've done!" He stood up, and gave Napoleon a sudden slap across the face that sent him reeling to the floor. There he kicked him and punched him. After taking a good beating, Napoleon got up and ran from his assailant, with his officer in tow as if to continue his assault outside. As he left, he could hear the soldier's friends laughing at his absurd contention - to think that the beaten peasant was none other than Napoleon!

When they were safely outside the city, the officer turned to Napoleon, falling to his feet. "How can I ever ask my Kaiser's forgiveness for what I've done?! Surely the Kaiser knows I meant no harm. Please, have mercy and do not punish me!"

"Stand up," Napoleon said. He raised his hand to slap the officer, and then returned it to its side.

"Were it that I could beat you," he said, "and by beating you save your life, and give you kingship and monarchy, then I surely would do so - for it's the least I could do to pay you back. Since I can't do that, however, I'll just do the best that I can." Napoleon elevated the officer to an extremely high position of authority, and gave him money and properties, all in payment for the thrashing he had given him.

"So you see," said Yosef to his brothers, "were it that I could punish you, and sell you into slavery, and by doing so elevate you to positions of extreme power, and save an entire family, and fulfil the destiny of a nation, then I would surely do so. After all, it's the least I could do to pay you back for what you've done to me. But am I in place of G-d - that I could pull the strings of destiny, creating good from bad and kindness from cruelty? That much I can not do. I can only guarantee you that ultimately I have only gratitude for the wheels that you helped set in motion, even if you did so unknowingly." [Va-yomer Avraham]

Have a good Shabbos.

*This week's publication was sponsored by Mr. Mel Merkur.*

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