

# STAY OFF MY TOES!

*by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner*

This week we read the parsha of Vayeshev: "And Yaakov dwelled in the land where his father had dwelled, in the Land of Canaan [37:1]." Rashi explains that after the Torah had told us of Esav's dwellings and progeny in very short detail, the Torah now relates in full detail the happenings of Yaakov and his children.

The parsha begins with the strained relationship between Yosef and his brothers which led to their selling Yosef. Very briefly, this sale is explained by the S'forno in the following way. The brothers viewed Yosef as a 'rodef' -- one who was coming to take their lives. By slandering them to their father, he was trying to have them cursed and their afterlife destroyed. To them, this was much more serious than having someone try to kill them in a physical sense. The law in regard to a 'rodef' is that, in self defense, one must kill him first. They therefore judged Yosef as deserving of death. Yielding to Reuven's pleading, they consented to throw him into a pit, instead of killing him with their own hands. They then agreed with Yehuda's proposal to sell him as a slave. This would prevent him from causing Yaakov to curse them and also, serve as a fitting punishment for his trying to lord over them.

We have a natural tendency to view and judge other people's actions and intentions by dragging them down to our level. I once heard that this can be compared to a toddler who was unceremoniously locked out of the bathroom because he insisted on playing with the water in the toilet bowl. Imagine the frustrated, angry thoughts the toddler entertains when seeing others go into the bathroom and lock the door behind them. "Just because they're bigger than me, they can go in and play with the water whenever they want..."

We 'toilet-splashers' must realize that we don't fathom the true intentions of great people involved in disputes ...

Rav Abraham Twerski tells of the seeming animosity that existed between Rabbi Boruch of Mezhibozh and Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev. Rav Boruch was sharply critical of Rav Levi Yitzchok and would never miss an opportunity to mock and belittle him.

One time, two merchants traveled from Mezhibozh to Berditchev for business. While there, they wanted to see Rav Levi Yitzchok for themselves. They entered his house and found him immersed in prayer. Suddenly, he ran over to one of the merchants, grabbed him by the jacket and said, "What can the angel Michael possibly say about you?!" and then returned to his prayers.

When they returned to Mezhibozh, they rushed to tell Rav Boruch about Rav Levi Yitzchok's latest

bizarre behavior, planning to give him more material to scoff at. However, when the merchant related the entire story, Rav Boruch began to shout at him, "You thief! Return the money you stole immediately!" The man was shocked into admitting that he had, in fact, stolen money from his companion.

Rav Boruch then explained. "When a Jew sins, the angel Michael pleads his case before the Heavenly Court. If a poor person steals, Michael alleges that the person's impoverished state distorted his judgment and caused him to act out of desperation. However, when a wealthy person, such as you, steals, what plea can he enter for you? That is what Rav Levi Yitzchok meant."

He then explained further. "Rav Levi Yitzchok is a tzaddik [righteous individual] whose spiritual sensitivity allows him to perceive everything. Why do I criticize him? Jews constantly pray for the coming of the Moshiach [Messiah], the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash [Holy Temple] and the restoration of the Divine Service. Some of the angels say to Hashem, 'Who needs the Temple? The prayer and service of Rav Levi Yitzchok is as great as that which the Kohen Gadol [High Priest] performed in the Holy of Holies.' I criticize him to show that I am not satisfied with him as a replacement for the Kohen Gadol -- we need the redemption and the Temple rebuilt!"

Our parsha also contains the episode of Yehuda and Tamar, and the attempted seduction of Yosef by aishes Potifar [the wife of Potifar]. Tamar, after the deaths of the two sons of Yehuda that she had married consecutively, resolved to have children from Yehuda himself. This would be a fulfillment of 'yibbum' [levirate marriage]. From this union would come the lineage of King David which would ultimately lead to the Moshiach. The court, unaware that Tamar was pregnant from Yehuda, sentenced her to death by burning for her seeming infidelity. Yehuda, also unaware that it was with Tamar that he'd had relations, stood by calmly.

As Tamar was being led to her death she sent to Yehuda his signet ring, his cloak and his walking stick. "L'ish asher ayleh lo anochi harah [I am pregnant from the man that these belong to] [38:25]." Yehuda immediately recognized that those were his and acknowledged that it was from him that she had become pregnant. Tamar thereby had not committed an act of infidelity but had fulfilled the mitzva of yibbum. Her life and the lives of the twins that she was carrying were thus spared.

This is immediately followed by the episode of Yosef and aishes Potifar [Potifar's wife]. Yosef, upon being brought down to Mitzraim [Egypt], was purchased by Potifar. Eventually, Potifar put him in charge of all of his affairs. Aishes Potifar repeatedly tried to seduce Yosef but he refused her advances. One day, when no one else was in the house, she grabbed his garment, demanding that he sleep with her. Yosef fled from the house, leaving his garment in her hand. Furious, she then claimed that Yosef had tried to seduce her and had run out of the house when she screamed, leaving his garment behind. For this, Yosef was thrown into prison.

The Medrash teaches that these seemingly antithetical episodes were written in the Torah one after the other in order to link and compare the two. Both Tamar and aishes Potifar had the purest of

intentions! Aishes Potifar saw through astrology that children would come from her and Yosef -- she didn't know if it would be directly through her or instead, through her daughter. Both, to the same exact degree, acted l'shem shamayim [for the sake of Heaven]!

If so, Rav Shalom Schwadron zt"l asks, how did Tamar merit to be the mother of both royalty and the Moshiach [Messiah] while aishes Potifar is eternally scorned as a lowly seductress? How, for heaven's sake, were Tamar's pure intentions considered for 'the sake of Heaven' while aishes Potifar's initially pure intentions left her Heaven forsaken? (Sorry -- I got a bit carried away.)

Rav Shalom explains that pure intentions to reach a lofty end are in no way sufficient. The crucial, deciding factor is how the person will act along the way. Intentions of l'shem shamayim show a desire to do the Will of Hashem. That very same Will of Hashem dictates that one must act in a G-dly fashion throughout the entire process. Any deviation from that reveals that the alleged l'shem shamayim is not really for the sake of Heaven but is rather for one's own personal interests, cloaked in a tallis [prayer shawl] of 'devotion'.

Tamar started with the purest of intentions. The Medrash states that she'd tap her stomach, saying I'm carrying kings and redeemers. Yet, when Yehuda sentenced her to be burnt, she waited for him to realize and admit that he was the father. If he wouldn't admit, then she and the future kings and redeemers would be burnt before she'd embarrass him! She never lost track of that Will of Hashem and ended up with eternal blessing.

Aishes Potifar also started with the purest of intentions. However, when Yosef was not willing to be a partner in her l'shem shamayim, then, in her eyes, he deserved to be destroyed. She felt that the entire world owed her everything -- she was acting l'shem shamayim! Such a l'shem shamayim, one that tramples everything in its way, shows that it was never truly pointed toward the Will of Hashem. She was left with eternal humiliation.

May we merit to rush toward lofty goals without stepping on anyone's toes in the process.

Good Shabbos,

Yisroel Ciner

---

Copyright © 1998 by [Rabbi Yisroel Ciner](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

---

The author teaches at [Neveh Tzion](#) in Telzstone (near Yerushalayim).

---