

TURNING POINTS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

At the end of two years, Pharaoh dreamed and behold, he was standing by the river. (Bereishis 41:1)

"At the end of two years ... The end of ten years and an additional two years [that Yosef spent in prison]." (Ba'al HaTurim)

It was the moment that Yosef had waited for: freedom from jail, though he didn't know what to expect -- would matters get better or worse? We, of course know that Yosef is finally on the way up, because we've read the story many times before.

It's been a lot of hardship for a teenage boy. From seventeen years of age until twenty-nine, Yosef had to fight to survive, not just physically, but psychologically as well. He was hated by his brothers and forced into slavery -- literally stolen away from the father and the life he loved. And, as if that weren't bad enough, his troubles followed him down to Egypt, and again he was forced into even greater captivity, this time by the wife of his master, Potiphar.

"What could be next?" Yosef must have wondered.

"What did Yosef do to deserve all of this?" we must be wondering.

Well, according to Rav Chaim Vital, Yosef himself caused the brothers to sell him, and all that happened to him as a result (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, p. 88). Between publicizing his dreams of rulership, and speaking loshon hara about his brothers, Yosef brought upon himself all of his misfortune. And, apparently, the ramifications of his actions went far beyond his own suffering. In fact, according to Rav Chaim Vital, Yosef HaTzaddik, unlike the future Rebi Yishmael Kohen Gadol, got off easy.

We know that the Ten Martyrs that we read about in the Mussaf Service of Yom Kippur and the Kinos of Tisha B'Av have a historical connection to the sale of Yosef. The Roman Emperor of that time even went so far as to fill an entire room with shoes just to set the atmosphere: Yosef, in the end had been sold for shoes!

"What is the law according to your Torah," the Roman ruler craftily inquired of the ten great sages of that time, "for a Jew who sells another into captivity?"

"Capital Punishment," answered Rebi Akiva and his colleagues.

"But, Yosef's brothers were never punished for their crime!" the Roman protested, and then began to set his deadly trap. "Justice must be done, and there has been no leaders to take their places until the ten of you!"

And they did take their places. Among the ten rabbis who died sanctifying the name of G-d was the great Rebi Yishmael, son of Elisha -- the Kohen Gadol of that time. He was the one, says the Talmud, who was so handsome -- handsome just like Yosef himself -- that the Emperor's daughter asked to have his skin flayed and preserved.

In fact, says Rav Chaim Vital, he WAS Yosef HaTzaddik -- or, at least his reincarnation -- and his death was an atonement for the sin of Yosef himself! This wasn't the only reason why Rebi Yishmael had to die so gruesome a death, but it was the main reason.

The truth is, as the commentators point out, Yosef did what he did for "good" reasons, and we've discussed many of those in the past. However, this reveals to us how even the "wrong" thing for the right reasons are still wrong -- very wrong. Good intentions are great when doing the right thing, to make them even better.

However, as we see from the Yosef-Rebi Yishmael story, it is important to be super careful when doing any act which may (or should be) questionable, especially when other people are involved. The ramifications of our actions are far reaching, even into future lifetimes yet to be lived.

Shabbos Day:

Ya'akov their father told them, "You have bereaved me of children: Yosef is no longer, Shimon is no longer, and Binyomin you will take?! All these things are upon me (ahlai)!" (Bereishis 42:36)

This just about summed up what Ya'akov's life was coming down to. He had survived Eisav, his hating and murdering brother, and his treacherous father-in-law, Lavan. But all of that was piling next to the sorrow that Ya'akov was being forced to undergo as his family slowly but surely disintegrated before his very eyes. It was more than the average father could handle.

Nevertheless, the Torah, when reporting Ya'akov's sentiments, seemed to add a few extra words: All these things are upon me. Of course they are -- upon whom else could they be? This is why the Gra (Vilna Gaon) sees in these words a different meaning, albeit on the level of hint.

According to the Gra, the word "ahlai" (ayin-lamed-yud) actually stands for three other words: Eisav (ayin), Lavan (lamed), and Yosef (yud). In other words, says the Gra, the Hebrew word "ahlai" was an allusion by Ya'akov as to what he understood, through prophecy, to be his tests in life: his battle against Eisav, his struggle with Lavan, and his loss of Yosef. However, complained Ya'akov, this did not include losing Binyomin and Shimon as well!

This is what Ya'akov was really worried about. A negative prophecy does not have to come true, but this one was being fulfilled in double! Had everything been by the book, that is, had the prophecy he had previously known about come true as Ya'akov had been told it would, then there was at least some consolation in knowing that nothing had really changed regarding his Divine Providence.

However, this change in history represented a change in Providence, Ya'akov assumed, one which may have meant an abandonment by G-d, G-d forbid, and failure of the Jewish mission. THAT was more than even Ya'akov could handle, for it meant that HE personally had failed to finish what his fathers before him had started.

Thank G-d, in the end, even Yosef was returned -- the yud of the word "ahlai," which personalized the word. With the return of Binyomin, Shimon, and even Yosef (in next week's parshah), the word "ahlai" is transformed from "upon me" to just "upon," indicating that Ya'akov was better off than his prophecy had previously indicated! The troubles that Ya'akov had been destined to suffer stopped at his own personal family, including only Eisav and Lavan in any permanent way.

Well, not exactly, as we saw in the previous d'var Torah, and others as well. And, as I have discussed before, after Ya'akov's death, the brothers will reveal that the seeds of doubt that led to the sale of Yosef in the first place were still very much alive in their minds, as indicated by the fear of Yosef's revenge at the end of Parashas Vayechi.

However, even still, even after the remaining rectifications to be made to Ya'akov's family have taken place throughout the millennia and into our own day -- as we struggle for unity and unconditional love of one another like never before -- we're still better off. For, it is better to have brothers you can "hate" for a period of time, with whom to mend the relationship, than no brothers at all, and no relationship to mend -- ever.

And, that was comfort enough for their father, Ya'akov Avinu, to take to his final days, because, make no mistake about it: there WILL be unity among the Jewish people. As difficult a reality that may be to fathom today, it will happen. Either we, as a people, will do it on our own by rising to higher levels of consciousness and out of own self interests, or G-d Himself will facilitate the higher state of brotherhood.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Yehudah said, "What can we tell my master ... what can we say ... and how can we justify ourselves? G-d found the sin of your servants, and we are now slaves to my master -- us and the one in whose hand the cup was found." (Bereishis 44:16)

Talk about turning points! Few passages in the Torah better convey the emotions of the characters involved than Yehudah's submission to the viceroy of Egypt in the above posuk. In last week's parshah we mentioned that dreams can take up to twenty-two years to become fulfilled; now we

see from Yehudah's admission that past mistakes can come back at us after twenty-two years as well.

According to Yonason ben Uzziel, Yehudah meant the following:

"What can we tell my master Regarding the first money [we found in our sacks] ... What can we say ... Regarding the latter money (i.e., the goblet found with Binyomin) ... And how can we justify ourselves ... ?"

In other words, Yehudah is saying, "I know what it looks like, and I know what you're thinking -- but you're wrong. Yes, the punishment here fits the crime, but not THIS crime. Rather, it is Divine retribution for a previous sin of ours that goes way back in years, twenty-two years to be exact -- when we sold our brother into slavery."

Had Yosef less self-control, he might have blurted out, "YOU BETTER BELIEVE IT, brother! And, you don't even have to look so high up for a cause either ... It is me, Yosef, that brother you refer to and whom you sold who is engineering all of this confusion for you!" However, Yosef's ruse wasn't over yet, so he kept his comments to himself and instead took the drama to its next pre-planned step.

It is considered to be an accepted fact among all the Torah commentators that Yosef worked for altruistic reasons. For one, there is no indication that Yosef was ever punished for putting his brothers, and even his father to some degree, through so much anguish. Secondly, Yosef's own father never criticized his son for all that had transpired, but rather, he blessed him with a full heart on his deathbed.

True, the Talmud states that Yosef died before his brothers for having a position of authority (Brochos 55a), but that does not seem to have any connection to the hide-and-go-seek episode Yosef played with his brothers. On the contrary, Yosef's revelation to his brothers is used as an analogy for how G-d will reveal Himself to man on that awesome prophesized "Day of Judgment."

It is another reason to call Yosef "tzaddik." Normally, Yosef is called "tzaddik" because he resisted the temptation of the wife of Potiphar (in last week's parshah), but, we can now include this entire story as a reason as well. How many people could sit in Yosef's position, looking down upon his personal antagonists, and not take revenge -- or even feel it in his heart? After all, everyone knows that a desire of revenge in the heart can't help but make it to the outside into the "real" world of action, at least a little.

Yet, Yosef kept his cool, and did not let revenge figure into his actions even a touch. How? Because, Yosef learned, understood, and accepted that everything that had happened to him, and was happening to him -- including Yehudah's humbling of himself before his previously hated brother -- was a function of DIRECT Divine Providence. Allowing personal feelings of revenge to entire the scenario would have been like stepping on G-d's "toes," so-to-speak, and interfering with the Master of the Universe's plan. Yosef was just grateful that G-d included him in the rectification process.

It sounds like an easy thing to accomplish, but in truth, it is most difficult. Even for people who believe in and accept the notion of G-d being behind all that happens to them, still, it is not so easy to act according to that belief when one is wronged, and, especially when one is in a position to "repay" that wrong. Of course, a person may say he is only "punishing" the perpetrator for the sake of justice, and the betterment of the other person. However, the question is, is that REALLY true ... even in his heart of hearts?

It better be. Because if it isn't, then the person is only setting himself up for G-d to step in, either to foil his plan NOW, or to let it go through to bring about punishment LATER. It is certainly no way to go about earning the appellation "tzaddik," and earning one's portion in the World-to-Come!

MELAVE MALKAH:

A psalm, sing to G-d a new song, for He has done wonders; His own right hand and His holy arm have helped him. (Tehillim 98:1)

This tehillah by Moshe Rabbeinu, the fourth in the Kabbalos Shabbos service, was written with the Naftali in mind. From Moshe's blessing of Naftali (Devarim 33:23), we see that Naftali symbolizes contentment and abundant success. Even Naftali's name implies this:

Rachel said, "G-dly wrestles (naftuli) I had with my sister, and I have prevailed; she called his name Naftali. (Bereishis 30:8)

To "prevail" in This World is not simply to be materialistically successful. In fact, so often material success comes at the cost of spiritual failure, which is why the Talmud says:

Be careful with the poor, for, from them Torah comes out. (Nedarim 81a)

"Poor," as we have seen in many cases, does not have to mean complete and abject poverty. Rather, it can mean that a person is quite well-to-do, but is also undistracted by his physical success, using it meaningfully but not defining himself by it -- and certainly not letting his financial concerns interfere with his spiritual growth.

In order to be able to achieve this, one has to be content with whatever he has whenever he has it. If a person has to always be concerned about protecting his property, or, increasing it, there is little time and energy left over for spiritual "projects." This, in turn, is only possible when one is in "partnership" with G-d, that is, one has faith in G-d and believes that G-d looks out for his best interest.

For twenty-two years, Ya'akov worried about the loss of Yosef. The Midrash says that this is what aged him the most, and he is faulted for not having had more faith in G-d. That may be difficult for us to comprehend (who wouldn't mourn the loss of a treasured child?), but, the Midrash says, for

someone of Ya'akov's stature, it was possible.

In fact, as Shlomo HaMelech wrote:

From the heights of faith you shall sing. (Shir HaShirim 4:8)

This means that one does not always have to feel privileged to sing shirah (holy song) to G-d; one needs to feel faith in G-d, as the prophet explained:

Blessed is the one who trusts in G-d -- G-d will be his trust. (Yirmiyahu 17:7)

This was Naftali. This, says the Midrash, was also the trait of Avraham Avinu, whose faith never wavered in spite of all his tests and hardships. And this, says the Midrash, will be the trait of the entire Jewish people in the time of Moshiach -- when tranquillity will reign and peace will be commonplace. However, in the meantime, it remains to be the test of every G-d-fearing Jew.

Good Shabbos & A Freilechen Chanukah, Pinchas Winston
