

THE ULTIMATE PAWN SHOP

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

And Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" (Bereishis 45:3)

Parashas Vayigash may be one of the shortest in the entire Torah, but it contains the climax of the story of Yosef and his brothers, and perhaps all of history until Moshiach's arrival. As briefly as the Torah portrays the build-up to the climax, one can still feel from the possukim much of the impact of the awesome resolution of a deadly conflict that spanned decades. However, most who are familiar with the story do not recognize it for what it really was, a near miss for the arrival of Moshiach. As the Torah says:

Yosef could not restrain himself in the presence of all who stood before him, so he called out, "Remove everyone from before me!" Thus no one remained with him when Yosef made himself known to the brothers. (Bereishis 45:1)

On the surface, it seems as if Yosef only wanted to spare his brothers some embarrassment before revealing himself to them. He knew it would come as a shocker to them, and who knows what they would have felt as a result. Indeed, the Torah records their reaction:

But his brothers could not answer him because they were left disconcerted before him. (Bereishis 45:1)

Yosef's revelation only left them confused, overwhelmed, feeling extremely guilty, and above all, duped. Here they had tried to dispose of their meddlesome brother, and instead they had set him on a course that "disposed" of them instead. What COULD they have said at a moment like that? Silence was the safest and best choice.

However, what does it mean, "Yosef could not restrain himself"? It sounds as if, had he been able to, he would have held out longer before revealing the secret of his true identity to his brothers. The question is, why would he and why didn't he?

The Midrash answers the latter question, explaining that the brothers had been preparing for war. They were not leaving without Binyamin, and that meant either by destroying Egypt to free him and then returning to Canaan, or be destroyed trying to do so. Indeed, Yehudah had already begun the process, destroying parts of Egypt, and it was when Yosef saw that Yehudah had taken all he could handle and had hit the war path, that is when he decided it was time to reveal himself to his brothers

(Bereishis Rabbah 93:8).

Thus, Yosef did not restrain himself in order to stave off a major confrontation that would have resulted in death and great destruction. If Yehudah had been a bit more patient, then Yosef would have continued on with his charade a little longer. And, then perhaps a whole different consequence would have resulted - the end of the conflict, the end of history as we know it, and the arrival of Moshiach.

But that is not the way the story ended, and we're still living out its conclusion. The question is, what didn't happen? What opportunity did Yehudah and his brothers miss that fateful day in Egypt, that doomed us to thousands of years of exile while we still wait Yosef's descendant, Moshiach ben Yosef to reveal himself?

It was the opportunity for Yosef NOT to reveal himself, and this requires some explanation.

SHABBOS DAY:

Do not be distressed, nor reproach yourselves for having sold me here, for it was to be a provider that G-d sent me ahead of you. (Bereishis 45:5)

In spite of what it seems like on the surface, Yosef was not a game player. How could he be? He was the son of Ya'akov Avinu, who was the son of Yitzchak Avinu, who was the son of Avraham Avinu. He was well aware of what their family was all about, of the prophecies his ancestors received, and of the plans and promises of G-d. Ironically, it was this knowledge that led the brothers to sell Yosef in the first place.

Everything was about building the Jewish people, for whom Moshiach would eventually come, and with whom the world would be brought to its final state of perfection, the perfection that Adam HaRishon failed to bring about. They knew what had to be done, but they just weren't always sure about the best way to accomplish it and when it would be achieved.

Furthermore, you can't go through what Yosef went through and not feel a part of something big - too many miracles, too many close calls that worked out. And, as we see from Yosef's attitude towards his brothers after the revelation, consoling them until the end of his own life, he did not become spiteful toward them, although he had plenty of reason to be. He certainly wasn't interested in overstepping his boundaries, playing G-d by judging the severity of his brothers' sin.

What then? Why the charade? Why hide himself from his brothers to the point that they were prepared to destroy all that they could in order to redeem Binyomin and save their family from further loss?

On the contrary, he had been revealing himself from the moment his brothers first arrived before him and his dreams by bowing down to him had been fulfilled.

Indeed, nothing would have pleased Yosef more than to have his brothers recognize him and to

rejoin the family after being separated from them for twenty-two years. The sooner he revealed himself, the sooner he could revive the broken spirit of his father and pick his relationship where it had been interrupted with his sale into slavery.

But Jewish history, especially in Biblical time, is never about personal preferences. Every Jew is an important piece of a puzzle that is incomplete if a piece is missing. No matter how small and seemingly insignificant the piece seems to be to us, we are here to serve the Klal - the totality of the Jewish people - and the only question we are being asked is, "Do you want to do this consciously, or do you want to merely be a pawn in G-d's master plan?"

Of course, the difference between the two is astronomical. There is no reward for being a pawn, but there is all the reward possible for one who takes a consciously active role in assisting G-d's master plan on its way to completion. It will happen in any case, just as it has always been happening, and thus even the most evil of events can't stop it, but given the appearance, in the end, it can speed up the process. This is what we acknowledge when we say, "All that G-d does, He does for the good" (Brochos 60b).

History is a play and G-d is the Playwright. He is also the Executive Producer, among many other things. Being outside of time, He has written the script up to its conclusion, and we are its actors. And as the actors we do not get to choose which parts we will play, but we do get to decide what kind of actors we will be so that when G-d starts casting the scenes of His historical play, we stand a better chance of getting our desired parts.

Or, you can just be an extra. Extras are like props, vehicles through which the main actors can play out their roles. They're out there on stage and in part of the film, but as a pawn they only set the stage for the more prominent (and much better paid) leading actors, like Yosef HaTzaddik, for example.

Yosef HaTzaddik was bringing Moshiach. Perhaps that process would allow him to re-unite with his father and family, and perhaps it wouldn't; only time would tell. However, in the meantime, he was taking a conscious role in a process that he felt was occurring all around him. He was Divine Presence sensitive, and he saw the events unfolding before him as an opportunity to rectify the brothers and bring about the Final Redemption.

That, Yosef knew, required that the brothers recognize him. Tikun for his brothers meant them coming to the conclusion on their own that he was Yosef. In other words, rather than Yosef saying, "I am Yosef," the brothers should have said to him, "Hey, you're Yosef! You have to be! Who else could know all that you know about us, and who else would put us through the ringer as you have for no real logical reason?" Everything Yosef did went a little further toward this cause, until all that remained was for Yosef to reveal himself.

However, the brothers missed the point and therefore the opportunity. Redemption stood before them in the form of the Viceroy of Egypt, but instead they only saw an enemy. Where Yosef set up

an intellectual and spiritual challenge, the brothers only saw a physical one, and when they forced Yosef to reveal himself to them, they effectively shut the door on the Final Redemption in their time.

Who wouldn't cry over that?

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

He (Chizkiah) did what was proper in the eyes of G-d, just as his forefather Dovid had done. (II Melachim 18:3)

The drama has been repeated many times throughout history, but perhaps the most famous story is that of Chizkiah HaMelech. The Talmud recalls how Sancheriv led a massive army - the United Nations of that time - against the Jewish people with the plan of conquering and destroying Jerusalem (Sanhedrin 4a). By nightfall, Jerusalem was besieged, and all that stood between Jerusalem and its total destruction was a few hours until daybreak.

So what did the righteous Chizkiah do? What all righteous Jews do: he prayed. He ran to the Bais HaMikdosh at the center of the siege, prostrated himself on the floor and prayed to G-d for redemption. Then he went to bed and slept soundly, only as an act of total belief and faith in G-d that his prayers would be answered.

And they were. That night as Chizkiah slept soundly in the eye of the deadly hurricane whirling about him, G-d did His part. A terrible plague broke out that instantaneously killed thousands of troops, causing the rest of them to flee the scene killing others as they ran in panic. When daybreak finally came, a totally different scenario presented itself to Chizkiah as he opened the shade to view the product of G-d's merciful and miraculous handiwork.

So great was the victory and the miracle that it had the potential to be THE battle of Gog and Magog, and Chizkiah, Moshiach Ben Dovid. That would have been it. History would have come to an end right then and there, and Yemos HaMoshiach would have begun as early as the third millennium, not at the end of the sixth millennium, as apparently seems to be the case.

What went wrong this time?

The Talmud answers that question as well: Chizkiah did not sing shirah for the victory. Had he only taken the time to do so for the fantastic victory, then he would have been Moshiach and Sancheriv would have been Gog and Magog, and we would have been born in Yemos HaMoshiach instead of watching mankind go through another downswing.

If only. If only? You mean Chizkiah HaMelech, the righteous Chizkiah, direct descendant of Dovid HaMelech who wrote the book on praising G-d - Tehillim - didn't thank G-d for the world-stopping miracle in his time? The same king about whom it says he caused all of the Jewish people to rise to great heights of Torah learning and obedience. He didn't praise G-d for his supernatural victory? How could that have been?

It could NOT have been. Certainly Chizkiah praised G-d, and praised G-d, and praised Him some more. However, what the Talmud probably means is that he didn't praise G-d commensurate to the miracle that had been performed, because, after all, it had been a phenomenal miracle. There really is no book written about the full extent one must praise G-d for the good done for him. The basic rules are supposed to channel what the person should feel on his own toward G-d, which hopefully is enough.

Apparently, whatever Chizkiah felt toward G-d for the miracle, and whatever he expressed, we would have thought it was more than sufficient. However, Heaven did not. The righteous Chizkiah HaMelech praised G-d from the depths of his heart no doubt, but apparently he had more to give, and it was that more to give that would have been the difference between the Final Redemption and thousands of years of bitter exile.

If only he had known.

MELAVE MALKAH:

"I, the L-rd, will hasten it in its time." (Yeshayahu 60:22)

This posuk is simple to understand, or so we might have thought until the Talmud explained it. From the simple reading of the verse, it sounds as if the prophet is referring to one time for the Final Redemption, until the Talmud explains to us that it is really referring to two: achishenah - hastened, as in early - and b'ittah - in its time, as in the last possible moment (Sanhedrin 98a).

The Talmud explains that the difference between the two possible arrival dates of Moshiach and the final redemption from exile is up to us. If we do that which can trigger the redemption on our own, which translates into a specific formula of teshuvah and good deeds, the precise amount of which is known only to G-d, then Moshiach will come "early," that is, before the last possible moment he can, based upon the master plan of Creation.

Thus, had Yosef's brothers only come to the realization of his identity before he revealed it, Moshiach would have come achishenah - early. Had Chizkiah only sung shirah to G-d for his great miracle and victory over the massive army of Sancheriv, he personally would have been the achishenah Moshiach. And, likewise, all the other predictions of great rabbis over the millennia for the arrival of Moshiach that have come and gone the way of Yosef and Chizkiah, if they were in fact true, would have been dates for achishenah.

However, and this is a very important and controversial point because of what it implies, we will find out that, like the posuk implies, the two dates really were one the entire time, as the Leshem explains:

The entire period of time is referred to as 'keitz d'b'ittah' (end in its time), and this is the simple reading of the verse, "I, the L-rd, will hasten it in its time (b'ittah)" (Yeshayahu 60:22). The verse is promising that the entire period of 'b'ittah' will not pass, rather that the time of redemption will be

hastened, and that 'early' will also be in 'its time' and thus both will be fulfilled . . . It will not be delayed for the entire period of b'ittah,' G-d forbid, but rather it will be hastened. (Kadosh, page 211)

Huh! You thought that there was a chance to bring Moshiach early, and therefore have been working hard to make it happen. And, you thought that Moshiach could come early, and that is why with Yosef it almost could have happened, and also Chizkiah was almost him. But, you know why Yosef failed to bring his brothers the final distance to redemption, and why Chizkiah came so close, but not close enough? Because Moshiach was never meant to come at those times.

To almost come, yes, but to come completely, apparently not.

Come early? He will. But it will also be the moment in time destined since Creation for him to come. Only G-d, Who is outside of time, can make that happen, and it could have been in Yosef's time, Chizkiah's time, or any other time throughout our long history of exile that seemed propitious for him to come. It is only after the fact, after the moment has come and passed that we know it wasn't THE moment.

Because when the moment does finally come, we won't make a mistake. We won't be able to. We'll simply find ourselves in the right places at the right times, in spite of ourselves, because that is where Heaven will want us to be. And, which place we will occupy at that time and how much reward we'll receive for being there will depend upon the type of actor we make ourselves into before that moment in time.

For, as with the earlier scenes, the latter scenes will also need stars and extras, knights and pawns. The play has been written, and the script has been set. The Director is now shopping for His characters, and so late in time after so many achishenahs have passed, it is worthwhile to ask, "What kind of characters will G-d 'need' at the End-of-Days?" Work on being available for the part.

POSTSCRIPT:

In Eretz Yisroel, it is not so uncommon that even the local carpenter knows a lot of Torah and has great insight into Jewish history.

This morning, as I dropped ours off at his workshop, he told me a five minute dvar Torah that is right on the money in so many ways. Quoting one of the past Roshei HaYeshivos of the Mir Yeshivah, he explained that the brothers really did recognize Yosef even before he revealed himself. However, an internal struggle prevented them from admitting to what they suspected because doing so meant scrapping the last twenty-two years of their lives in light of the fulfillment of Yosef's dreams.

That is what forced Yosef to keep pushing them to recognize him. Yet, instead of capitulating and admitting the truth, as Yehudah had done earlier with Tamar, the brothers chose to ignore the truth and fabricate a newer and more dangerous one that would have had them go to war against Egypt and do battle against themselves. Only Yosef's own admission put them into a corner from which they could not escape the truth, and with the collapse of the lie and the automatic admission of

truth, they were devastated once and for all.

The nagar (carpenter) concluded that this is what holds back our own redemption, our admission of our own mistakes and our own lack of willingness to recognize the hand of G-d in what is going on today to bring the Final Redemption.

I was astounded recently to hear some say, "Well, you were wrong about your predictions back in 1999 and 2000. The redemption didn't come like you said it would."

And that was just after reading an 11-page report on the phenomenal and seemingly irreversible trend of growing anti-Semitism that followed in the wake of the events of Year 2000. It was if the people were standing there on a sunny day saying, "No rain clouds today. Weatherman blew it on this one."

But there are rain clouds today, serious ones, just as we said there would be back then and earlier. The destruction of the World Trade Center and new world insecurity followed in 2001, and the world has never resumed the status quo since. Given the events of today, what can we expect tomorrow?

There is no question that Year 2000 was a watershed year. Only by G-d's mercy (and 64 billion dollars of repairs) did Y2K not deliver the worldwide chaos many feared it would. However, it did show us something very important, and that is how vulnerable our society is because of its dependence on computer controlled mechanical systems. It showed us our Achilles Heel, or rather gid hanasheh, while we still able to walk.

But rather than be humbled and learn from the experience, we simply celebrated our ability to stave off doom. Until, that was, 19 Arab terrorists declared war on the United States of America, and took down 3000 people and two mighty symbols of American prowess and self-confidence. It took days to recover from that worldwide chaos, and the truth is, we never really have.

There is a pattern to all of this, one that stretches far back in time than the most recent events. Predictions for the arrival of Moshiach are difficult, if not impossible to make. But patterns, past and present are far easier to pick up and recognize, if one chooses to be a conscious partner with G-d in bringing Jewish history to its pre-destined finale, and it will be a beauty. All we have are the patterns to help us sort out our priorities at this late and confusing stage of history.

They laughed at Moshe Rabbeinu right before the Plague of Darkness eliminated twelve million blind-sided disbelievers. And, the lack of clouds in the sky moments before the Flood left Noach's generation unrepentant until the last moment. And, as we have quoted several times before, the Talmud and Kabbalah are concerned about the generation in advance of Moshiach's arrival as well.

Chanukah is over now, at least for this year, but its message is for the entire year. As we learn from many sources, and particularly the Rambam, it is a holiday of hoda'ah, a word that means both praise of G-d and admission of truth. And, if we learn anything from the story of Yosef and his brothers at all, it is the importance of admitting to the truth of the events of our time, even if doing so means

admitting to past mistakes and the need to change the course of our lives. It is the only way to go from being a pawn of history to a knight in G-d's army.

Have a great Shabbos,

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Text

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