

BIG PICTURE SOLUTIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

When Yosef's brothers rejected him, it was for a very specific reason. He was not like them, and seemed more into the trappings of this world than those of the next one. They saw him as being dangerous for the future of the Jewish people:

They said to one another, "Behold the ba'al hachalomos—the dreamer . . . (Bereishis 37:19)

They said: "This one will lead them everyone to [worship] the [idol] Ba'al." (Bereishis Rabbah 84:14)

The Midrash is making a play on the word "ba'al," which when joined with the word, "hachalomos," means dreamer. However, Ba'al was also the name of one of the foremost venues of idol worship in Biblical times, and hence, the explanation of the Midrash regarding the brothers' complaint against Yosef, which apparently was not unfounded:

When Yeravam was young, he was righteous . . . But later he built the golden calves and caused the Jewish people to sin. (Zohar Chadash, Acharei 40:8)

After the death of Shlomo HaMelech, the Kingdom of David divided into two, as had been foretold, necessitating two kings from that point onward. The Davidian Dynasty continued to the south, in what was called the Kingdom of Yehudah, and it was ruled by Rechavam, the son of Shlomo HaMelech and true heir to the throne. Yeravam ben Nevat, from the tribe of Ephraim, was the first to rule over the northern Kingdom, called the Kingdom of Israel.

Despite the division, the Jews of the northern kingdom continued to make the tri-yearly pilgrimage on the holidays to Jerusalem, where the Temple still stood, and as was the mitzvah. And once they arrived there, they would see Rechavam HaMelech sitting inside the Temple, in a spot designated for kings from the line of David only, a reminder to the Jews of the north that Yeravam, their king, was not an heir to the throne.

This, of course, was unacceptable to Yeravam, who schemed to put an end to such pilgrimages. He established local places of worship so that his subjects would not feel the need to leave their kingdom, and he set up golden calves to entice worshippers to stay local. Hence, as Yosef's brothers had predicted, a descendant of Yosef led many Jews to idol worship.

However, so did Menashe, the son of Chizkiyahu HaMelech, a direct descendant of Yehudah. Hence, leading the nation astray, apparently, had not been completely a Yosef thing. Furthermore, judging by the way things played themselves out, not only had the brothers not been vindicated by Heaven, but reprimanded. As sure as they had been about themselves in the beginning, even making God promise not to tell Ya'akov that they had sold Yosef, as the Torah reports, in the end, they never regained their confidence.

Even worse, many generations later when the Roman Caesar wanted an excuse to murder ten of the greatest rabbis of his time, he used the sale of Yosef as justification. "The punishment for kidnapping a fellow Jew and selling him," the Caesar pointed out to the martyrs, "is capital punishment, and there have been none like them, until you," he told his victims, "who could stand in their place and receive it." We are reminded of this every year during the Mussaf Service of Yom Kippur, and the Kinos of Tisha B'Av.

Judging by the way that Heaven took care of Yosef along his way to becoming Second-in-Command over the mightiest nation of his time, it would seem as if God had not shared the concerns of the brothers. Quite the contrary, Heaven seemed to have invested in Yosef from the start, as did his father, Ya'akov Avinu, which begs the question: Being the righteous people they had been, and the great leaders they had become, how did the brothers get it so wrong when analyzing Yosef and his role in Jewish history?

It has to do with being human and pursuing ideals, and the loftier the ideals, the more it will be true. In fact, it is religious ideals believed to have come from God Himself that result in human extremism, usually by people who feel they best represent those ideals. Thus, it is usually an extremism that can only be recognized by people who do not feel as strongly about the same ideals and, therefore, less pressured to achieve them.

Godly ideals are absolutes and make compromise difficult. Hence, anyone who does not promote the achieving of said ideals is seen as detracting from them and, therefore, as an enemy. He is feared and, when possible, attacked and defeated. Anything that helps to promote the counter-idealist's version of reality is a weapon that our enemies use to keep us from doing the right thing and must be destroyed. This happens all over the world, and has happened all throughout history. Hence, a lot of innocent and otherwise harmless people have been needlessly hurt for this reason. Yosef HaTzaddik was just one example of this.

However, the fact that God gave us a Torah laden with religious ideals makes the point that having them is not the problem. The problem, rather, is what people do with them once they integrate them and combine them with their own personal agendas. As the Torah points out, though the brothers rejected Yosef on principle, their attack was the result of hatred and jealousy. How easy it is to turn a personal enemy into a sinner in one's own subjective eyes.

The story of Yosef and brothers teaches us many things. One important lesson is about the dangers

of oversimplifying religious ideals, which can be a relative concept. This is because what can seem overly simple to one person can be profound for another. Not all minds are the same, and different people have different ways of relating to concepts and events.

That is why each person must make a point of stretching his imagination and going as deep into an idea as he can. After that, God will make up for any lack, either giving the person understanding beyond his means, as it says, "The secrets of God to those who fear Him" (Tehillim 25:14), or by making sure the person is never tested beyond his understanding. A person is only held responsible for what he could have known, but did not know.

Thus, though it was true that Yosef was not an easy person to figure out, nevertheless, he could be figured out, if someone took the time to do it. The fact that the brothers were held so accountable for their mistreatment of Yosef shows that God had expected more from them, something that their ideals may have hampered more than they helped.

The world is a complex place, which is part of its wondrous beauty. The Jewish people, in their own right, are both complex and complicated. As Moshe Rabbeinu found out in this week's parshah, with individuals come individual needs, and with unusual circumstances comes the need for creative action and reaction. The solutions of the past are not necessarily the solutions of the present.

Moshe Rabbeinu, unlike the rest of the nation, never lost his temper. He may have gotten angry, but he never lost control. Thus, if he displayed anger, it was because he thought it was the appropriate response to the situation, according to God. As Rashi told the Angel of Death in last week's parshah, everything Moshe said or did was from God, or at least what he had worked out to be God's will.

Yet, in this week's parshah, he erred. Somehow, the greatest prophet that ever lived, during the incident with the rock, misread the situation, misread the people, and misread God's reaction to the crisis. And, it was an error of such major significance that it cost Moshe Rabbeinu the opportunity to enter the Promised Land, and the Jewish people, their Moshiach. We are still in exile to this very day, and have endured all the suffering we have as a result, because of Moshe Rabbeinu's reaction to the unruly request for water.

As if that wasn't bad enough news, remarkably, rather than rebuke the people, God rebuked Moshe Rabbeinu, and with the following biting criticism:

"You didn't believe in Me." (Bamidbar 20:12)

He hadn't? Moshe Rabbeinu hadn't believed in God, after being called the most trusted servant in God's house—by God himself (Bamidbar 12:7)? Our belief in God should only come close to his lack of belief in this week's parshah! What did God mean with this?

God meant that Moshe Rabbeinu, by the way he dealt with the situation, exhibited a lack of understanding of how the current crisis was also Hashgochah Pratis, and was meant to lead to a

better reality. His lack of calmness and patience with the people gave the impression of chaos, and of need to impose from above order on the situation. Apparently, he saw the situation as it unfolded, but he did not see into the situation for what it was really meant to be, dealing with it in very much the same extreme way that the brothers had dealt with Yosef. He had oversimplified the crisis.

What is supposed to separate the Jewish people from the rest of the nations of the world, and make our religious ideals unique is the way they help us to size up a situation and custom design a response to it that is truly Godly. While the rest of the world oversimplifies reality, and makes horrible and often tragic mistakes, the Jewish people are supposed to plumb its depths and see it in terms of the bigger picture, and resolve it with big picture solutions. Getting angry and hitting the proverbial rock is not always the correct response to a crisis, as easy as it seems to be one.

Sometimes it is. When Zimri took Cozbi, the Midianite princess, before the eyes of the rest of the nation, he had to be stopped, and if necessary, with extreme means. So, Pinchas took his spear, snuck into his tent, and speared the two of them in the midst of the act before taking them outside for the nation to see what he had done. With his extreme act, he had appeased God, won Divine praise as a result, and ended the crisis.

However, when the Erev Rav incited the Jewish people to build the golden calf, when Moshe Rabbeinu hadn't returned when they had expected him to, no one grabbed for a spear. Rather, after Aharon HaKohen saw his nephew, Chur, get killed by the angry mob for trying to stop them, he pretended to help them with their plan, to stall for time until Moshe came back.

As the Talmud says, Aharon was concerned lest they kill him too, which had been a bigger problem for them than it had been for him. For, since Har Sinai at that time had the status of the Temple, and Aharon HaKohen was already the Kohen Gadol, killing him then and there would have sealed the fate of the entire generation, since there is no atonement for such a dreadful sin.

So, like Pinchas after him, Aharon HaKohen, by even giving the impression of furthering the plan of the Erev Rav, risked his portion in this world, and in the next one as well, to save the Jewish people. However, unlike Pinchas, he left his spear at home, and used a dramatically different and even radical approach to solve the crisis of the day, one that, at first, might have seemed to fly in the face of Torah ideals.

His had been a big picture approach, which is why he was not only forgiven for what he did, he even remained the chief spiritual leader of the Jewish people. Rather than oversimplify the crisis, he looked deep into it, and fashioned an approach that even Moshe Rabbeinu had difficulty understanding at first:

Moshe asked Aharon, "What did this people do to you to make you bring so great a mistake upon them?" (Shemos 32:21)

This is the approach that all of us are supposed to take towards life in general, but crises in particular. We can get to the bottom of ideas and circumstances because we have the God-given tools to do this. We have "Pardes," four levels of Torah learning that allow us to plumb the depths of concepts and reality in order to understand them on levels that the rest of the world cannot. More importantly, when we do this, we get Heavenly help to successfully diffuse the crisis in a way that works for all the necessary people.

However, if we ignore these tools, and continue to take overly simplistic approaches to the crises facing the Jewish people, showing instead angry faces and hitting rocks, so-to-speak, as Moshe Rabbeinu did in this week's parshah, then the distinction between our responses to religious crises and those of the rest of the world begins to fade. And, when that fades, so does the special Divine Providence that we require to keep our heads above water, especially in exile. And, we don't have to look too far back in history to see what can occur when that happens, God forbid.

Text

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