

READING THE SIGNS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef, is my father still alive?" But his brothers weren't able to answer him because they were in shock. (Bereishis 45:3)

Overall, it had been quite the deception. When it was all said and done, Yosef had really taken his brothers for a ride, and not just deceiving them, but even causing them to panic on probably more than one occasion. They may have deserved it because of what they had done to Yosef, as Reuven said in last week's parshah:

The brothers said to one another, "We are guilty because of our brother. When he pleaded with us, we didn't pay attention. Therefore this anguish has come to us." (Bereishis 42:21)

Nevertheless, what happened to "two wrongs don't make a right," and, "revenge is God's"? Wasn't Yosef, by putting his brothers through the wringer acting in God's place, and therefore, making a big mistake? Apparently not, because we never see that he is either reprimanded for having acted as he did, or punished for it. It seems that he not only didn't act in God's place, but that he acted with God's consent. It was as if, in the end, God was the One doing everything against the brothers, and Yosef was just the Divine instrument to execute the will of God.

This is certainly not something the average person can do. For example, as much fun as it may be for some to stand behind a door and to scare a person who walks into the room, almost giving them a heart attack, or to pull a chair away from a person just as he is about to sit down so that, to his utter surprise, he misses the chair, hits the floor hard, and suffers humiliation, this is a halachic problem.

What if someone actually died from a prank, God forbid? There are cases where the person might not be held responsible by a human court, but as far as God is concerned, the person is guilty, and will have to answer for his actions at some point. Killing a person indirectly is not necessarily a reason for a human court to give a person capital punishment, but that doesn't mean that God won't.

Perhaps Yosef knew that after all was said and done, his brothers would be OK, but the Torah testifies to their mental state:

Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef, is my father still alive?" But his brothers weren't able to answer him because they were in shock. (Bereishis 45:3)

Yet we know that everything Yosef did he did was done because he knew it was what God wanted him to do. He knew that his brothers needed to undergo rectification, and that God had arranged everything for that reason. His job, he understood, was to do what had to be done, but not to get personally involved in the situation, at least not negatively. He knew that the moment he would, then taking vengeance on behalf of God would become vengeance on behalf of himself.

We have an example of both in the Torah. For example, when Shimon and Levi went into the city of Shechem and took vengeance for the kidnapping and violation of their sister, Dinah, they were later criticized by Ya'akov, on his deathbed, for the damage they did and almost caused. Apparently some personal anger had slipped into the picture and had tainted their motivations and therefore their actions.

On the other hand, much later in history, when Pinchas pursues Zimri and Kosbi to kill them on behalf of God, he acted solely on behalf of God even though anyone else might have come at Zimri with a lot of personal disgust. However, God confirmed his purity of motivation by saying:

God told Moshe, "Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon HaKohen, stopped My anger towards the Children of Israel because he was zealous on My behalf, which prevented Me from destroying them because of jealousy. (Bamidbar 25:11)

That's quite a level to reach. In fact, it is such a high level of spiritual commitment and ability to nullify one's own thoughts and feelings that it begs the question: How does one know that he has reached that level? Shimon and Levi, prior to entering Shechem and wreaking havoc in Shechem, must have thought they were on that level, only to find out after the fact that they had fallen short.

How do we know that Yosef did not fall short, and that he never acted with any personal motivation? The Torah, as if anticipating our question, writes:

They didn't know that Yosef understood them because there was an interpreter between them. He turned away from them and wept. (Bereishis 42:23-24)

This shows that it wasn't anger that Yosef harbored towards his brothers, but mercy. He truly felt bad for them, and at that point, seeing their remorse, it would have been easy to reveal himself and unite the family. Furthermore, he knew that whatever he did to his brothers was going to get back to his father, and cause him pain as well. That had to have made it very difficult for Yosef to carry out his plan.

In fact, because it was so difficult for him he knew that carrying it out was only possible if he was l'Shem Shemayim, acting for the sake of Heaven. This is why he revealed himself prematurely, when Yehudah, at the beginning of this week's parshah, threatened to go to war against him and to destroy Egypt.

But then again, that wasn't his fault. He had already gone this far with the charade; what would be the point if its purpose wasn't satisfied? Rather, the brothers never really caught on to what was

going on to pronounce the magic words that would have ended everything quite differently, result instead in an earlier Messianic Era, rather than thousands of years of exile: You are Yosef!

After all, wasn't it obvious? How else could the Viceroy of Egypt know so much about them, as Yehudah pointed out to Ya'akov Avinu back in Parashas Mikeitz? And, why else would the Viceroy take such an interest in them and their family, and toy with them as Yosef had. By eliminating all the possible explanations, the only one that would fit the bill was that the Viceroy was Yosef, as hard as they would have been to believe and accept. However, we shouldn't be too quick to shake our heads at Yosef's brothers, because they're probably doing it right now, in Heaven, at us. They're probably watching history transpiring for us, knowing full well that God is wrapping up history and warning us about what He plans to do next. And, though we scratch our heads and remark out loud that weird things are happening that cannot be explained by normal historical trends, still, we go on with our lives as nothing much is changing.

So the brothers yell down at us, "Can't you see what is happening around you? Can't you see the direction history is going? Do you not see how everything is leading in the direction of the War of Gog and Magog, and after that, Yemos HaMoshiach? How can you just get up the same way each day and continue on as if nothing is changing?"

They might even add for good measure, "If you think we were shocked when our brother revealed himself, just imagine the shock you'll be in when you see how you overlooked all the warning signs that God was bringing the Final Redemption? We kicked ourselves because of what we overlooked. Just wait and see how you'll want to kind yourselves because of what you overlooked!"

Chanukah is now past us, but its main message is supposed to guide our lives all year round. One of the reasons why we light eight candles, though the oil only burned for seven extra days, is to remind us that nature is just the miraculous in disguise. As Rebi Chanina ben Dosa told his daughter, "Ultimately, it is as big a miracle that oil burns as it is if vinegar burns."

The person who becomes real with this message and is able to see past the obvious is the person who can read the signs that God sends man to warn him of what is coming up. That is the person who, on the Final Day of Judgment, won't have to be told by God, "I am God," because he'll already be saying, "You are God . . . and I saw Your hand in my life every step along the way.

Text

Copyright © by [Rabbi Pinchas Winston](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkafa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! www.thirtysix.org