

# SEEING AND BELIEVING

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

And now, you did not send me here, but God, and He made me a father to Pharaoh, a lord over all his household, and a ruler over the entire land of Egypt. (Bereishis 45:8)

THE MIDRASH TELLS us what Yosef did to anger his brothers and cause them to consider harming him. He had seen the brothers doing things that, to his eyes, appeared like transgressions, and dutifully informed his father. Ya'akov promptly took up the issue with his sons, which antagonized Yosef's brothers and fanned the flames of hatred.

From Yosef's perspective, even if the brothers hadn't actually violated anything, they were at least guilty of looking as if they had, and for sons of Ya'akov, that cannot be. After all, they were the fathers of the future Jewish nation, a people who would have to one day abide by the concept of *ma'aris ayin*, which literally means, "appearance to the eye." This is a halachah to not mislead people by one's actions, giving the impression that something that is forbidden is permissible.

Just to show how dangerous *ma'aris ayin* can be, the Talmud states:

Students asked Rebi Shimon bar Yochai, "Why did the enemies of the Jews of that generation warrant destruction?"

He told them, "You tell me."

"Because they took pleasure from the feast of that evil one."

"If so, then only those in Shushan should have incurred death, not those who lived elsewhere."

They told him, "Then, you tell us!"

"Because they bowed down to the idol."

"Then why did they merit the miracle?"

"Because they did so only for appearance sake (i.e., out of fear), and therefore, God acted towards them for appearance sake." (Megillah 12a)

Thus, Yosef, by reporting his brothers' actions to their father, had indirectly taught them what our rabbis later expounded:

Rebi said: Which is the proper path that a person should choose? Whatever is a credit to himself and earns the respect of his fellow men. (Pirkei Avos 2:1)

Yosef was teaching them that:

A person has to appear innocent before man just as he does before God, as it says, "Then you will be absolved before God and Israel" (Bamidbar 32:22). (Shekalim 12b, Yoma 38a, Pesachim 13a)

However, though Yosef's charges against his brothers may have been partly valid, the Midrash makes it clear that reporting to his father constituted *loshon hara*, derogatory speech about his brothers. And, if speaking honorably hastens the *geulah* (Pirkei Avos 6:6), then speaking unsuitably certainly hastens exile, and that is what happened first to Yosef, and then to his brothers.

And, Yosef's problems did not end after being sold into slavery. On the contrary, it was shortly after arriving in Egypt that his biggest challenges began, especially that of being pursued by the wife of his new master Potiphar, also because of how he appeared:

Yosef was of beautiful form. (Bereishis 39:6)

However, as Rashi adds, Yosef was not an innocent bystander in all that happened to him:

As soon as he saw that he was ruler, he began to eat and drink and curl his hair. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, "Your father is mourning and you curl your hair—umesalsel b'sa'arecha?! I will let a bear loose against you." (Rashi)

The "bear", of course, refers to the wife of Potiphar. However, of all the animals with which to compare a beautiful temptress, the bear seems the least likely—unless, of course, one takes into account that the bear is also the symbol of a nation: Persia (Avodah Zarah 2b). Is this another connection between Yosef's exile and the one into Persia, 40 generations later?

Even the concept of curling hair can have special meaning, and be considered connected to *Da'as*:

The rabbis did not know what the following meant: "Esteem it—salsela'ah—and it will exalt you" (Mishlei 4:8), until they heard Rebi's handmaid say to someone busying himself with his hair, "For how long will you curl your hair—mesalsel b'sa'arecha?" (Megillah 18a)

We have learned that "curling" can mean "searching" and "turning over." (Rashi)

Turning over? That sounds a lot like Torah, which must be "turned over" constantly in order to penetrate its depths:

Ben Bag Bag said: Turn it over and over again, for everything is in it. (Pirkei Avos 5:26)

How else can a person see past the superficial levels of Torah and reach the level of *Sod*? Torah only appears simple on the surface, and for this reason, irrelevant to those who do not turn it over and over to understand its deeper meaning, like Yosef himself:

And now, you did not send me here, but God, and He made me a father to Pharaoh, a lord over all his household, and a ruler over the entire land of Egypt. (Bereishis 45:8)

That was pretty good. To go through what Yosef did and still come out believing this and feel no animosity towards the perpetrators was a very high level of realization. Even for a person who believed this, he could still be angry at the people who carried it out. Yosef wasn't, and he hoped his brothers would intellectually leap up to the same level.

They didn't. We see this at the end of Parashas Vayechi when they lied to save themselves from what they thought would be Yosef's vengeance. He cried about that, because it meant that the brothers had not learned the lesson, and that exile was coming up to teach it.