

DIVINE OR NOT?

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Last week's Rabbi's Notebook requires further explanation and clarification. The difference between Yoseph and his brothers that set the Avos apart from the Shevatim was the ability to fully trust the word of G-d as taught to them by a teacher. The Avos and Yoseph were fully and unquestioningly accepting of what they were taught and told. The brothers, on the other hand, were willing to accept what they knew with certainty to be the word of G-d; however, they retained the right to question the interpretation of G-d's word.

In past editions of the Rabbi's Notebook we have discussed the interpretation of prophecy. Two of the most prominent prophecies in Bereishis are the Bris Bain Habisarim - the Covenant Between the Halves, and the prophecy regarding the births of Yakov and Eisav. In both instances, there was disagreement of the word of G-d.

The prophecy of, "two nations in your womb..." was understood differently by Rivkah than it was understood by Yitzchak. Yitzchak believed that Yaakov and Eisav would be different from each other; however, they would be partners with each other in the creation of Am Yisroel. "The voice is the voice of Yakov but the hands are the hands of Eisav."

Rivkah, on the other hand, understood the prophecy to mean exactly what it said. The two children would grow up to be two separate nations who would be in constant conflict with each other.

The Covenant Between the Halves was understood by the Avos and Yoseph one way and by the Shevatim in a different way. The Avos accepted that the Bnai Yisroel would have to undergo the three stages of alienship, enslavement, and affliction and that the three stages would together equal 400 years. They also believed, as Avraham had taught, that the length of the stages could be manipulated so that the first stage of alienship would last the longest and take place in the land of Canaan. They hoped to limit the number of years spent in slavery and affliction by extending the number of years of alienship.

Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, and Yoseph were all committed to this approach. Therefore, they did everything in their power to maintain the status of a stranger-visitor-non-citizen-Ger for as long as possible. (*Avraham returning to Aram Naharayim at the age of 70. *Avraham distancing himself from Lot for posturing himself as heir and owner of Canaan. *Avraham chancing the purchase of Meoras Hamachpeilah, as a citizen or a Ger. *Yitzchak not fighting for ownership over the wells. *Yaakov's criticism of the brothers after the incident with Shechem.) They believed that as soon as they began

to act as citizens of Canaan the stage of slavery would begin. However, by extending the stage of "alienship" they would limit the period of servitude and affliction. The brothers differed with this interpretation.

There are many approaches to understanding the conflict between Yoseph and his brothers. The following is a personal insight motivated by Rav Eliyahu KiTov's illuminating approach to the sale of Yoseph.

The three stages of the Covenant are clearly delineated in Bereishis 15:13. 1) Alienship - Geirus. 2) Enslavement - Avdus. 3) Affliction - Eenuy. The brothers felt that the three stages did not necessitate leaving the land of Canaan. They believed that the first stage of Alienship had been completed with the Avos. They had come as strangers to Canaan, had postured themselves as non-citizens, had left the land when forced to, and had returned as a fourth generation! (Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, Shevatim. See 15:16). It is even possible that they believed that the stages of the Covenant did not have to take place in the listed order. The years of exile and affliction that Yakov had endured may have been the fulfillment, in part or in whole, of the second and third stages of the prophecy.

The second stage of the Covenant, enslavement, was also a matter of interpretation. Who said that slavery meant forced labor, loss of liberty, and shackles? Slavery - Avdus could have meant the responsibility of serving humanity as teachers and kings! Community service is, more often than not, a relentless mistress who oppresses her servants.

Copyright © 2000 by [Rabbi Aron Tendler](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
