

FOR SHAME OR PRIDE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Imagine the shame! For twenty two years they collectively harbored a dark secret. For twenty two years they lied to their father while witnessing his descent into the bowels of misery and pain. For twenty two years they lied to each other that the decision to sell Yoseph into slavery was justified and judicial - essential for the survival of their family and future nation! And now he stood before them all powerful and mighty holding their destiny and the destiny of their family in his hands. How did they feel? Their younger brother, the apple of his father's eye, the dreamer, the handsomest and sharpest of them all, the one they so deeply wronged in a manner beyond comprehension and empathy. Yoseph stood before them as the second most powerful, if not most powerful man in the world. The scene destroyed the protected sanctuary of twenty two years of lying and denial in a single inescapable moment! It was too much to accept, too much to register. His words assaulted their disbelieving senses. (45:3) "I am Yoseph! Is my father still alive?" Imagine their absolute and abject shame!

The Torah records, "...His brothers could not answer him because they were bewildered." Rashi explains their reaction in two words (Hebrew), "because of the shame." Let's analyze the brothers and their reaction. As young and impetuous young men they judged Yoseph lacking and dangerous and decide to do something about it. At first they wanted to kill him but not everyone agreed. Reuven was the first to voice his dissent followed soon after by Yehudah, and in the end they decided to consign his fate into the hands of G-d by selling him as a slave to the passing merchants. Did the brothers ever regret their decision? Did they ever tell Yakov the horrible mistake they had made and start searching for their long lost brother? Even the Medresh about them entering Egypt from ten different gates in hope of possibly finding Yoseph appears more opportunistic than corrective. If they never regretted their decision, if they believed that despite the great sacrifice and pain they were justified, why were they ashamed? Regardless of what he had become, if their decision was the correct one what was there to be ashamed of? Granted, the moment could not have been very comfortable for the brothers; however, as G-d fearing men their shame should only have been before G-d, not a mere man of flesh and blood!

More so, if they now believed that they had wronged Yoseph, why was their reaction shame for what they had done rather than terrible regret for having committed a seemingly unforgivable sin against Yoseph and G-d? Shame is a feeling that should come after having sinned when the sinner realized the grievousness of having sinned. It should not be shame first and regret for sinning second. My Grandfather asked this question and his answer is a fundamental insight into the processes that

Hashem instilled in our nature to help us avoid sinning, and if need be, do Teshuvah.

Shame and embarrassment are feelings and reactions that Hashem created within us to stop us from sinning. "Who is a wise man? A person who can anticipate the future." The wisdom of the wise is not intended to be reserved for strategic planning alone. The wise man is one who anticipates the future in all areas of his life - not least among them the cause and consequence of every action. When Yoseph was challenged with Potifar's wife the Talmud relates that at a critical moment in the confrontation Yoseph recalled the face of his father Yakov. This Medresh underscores the power that shame could have as a deterrent to sin. "How can I, the son of Yoseph and grandson of Yitzchak and Avraham, allow myself to stay in this place at this time?" My other grandfather, Rav Yitzchak Isaac Tendler Zt'l, explained, Yoseph was so smart yet he left his garment behind as evidence. How could he have been so foolish? He explained that Yoseph would have taken it with him if his reaction had been intellectual rather than instinctual. It was not! Instead, he reacted from the gut. "I cannot be here. This is wrong for me. I am the son of Yakov!" Instead, he fled and left his garment behind. The shame Yoseph would have felt had he sinned deterred him from staying where he should not have remained.

My Grandfather Zt'l explained in Darash Moshe that the brothers deliberately turned off their shame after selling Yoseph into slavery. Regardless of what regrets they may or may not have had over the intervening twenty two years, they refused to feel ashamed. When finally confronted by Yoseph himself, the Torah states that it was the shame they felt more so than the regret of their sin. The reason was that had they imagined to themselves at the time of the sale what they would feel like if at sometime in the future their actions would be exposed for all to see, they would never have sold Yoseph. Therefore, it was the immediate shame that they felt that rendered them bewildered and speechless before the victim of their sin.

A wise person sees the future. Actions have consequences and first among them is the shame we feel when what we have done is exposed. If only we would embrace the inherent protectors that G-d has programmed into us and imagine the shame and embarrassment we would sin far less. Would we be like Yoseph Hatzadik and the son and daughter of Yishamel the Kohain Gadol (High Priest), running from sin because of where we come from and who we are supposed to be? I do not know; however, the lesson is clear. The faces of our mothers and fathers should always be before us. We must imagine the shame and imagine the pride. Hopefully we will choose pride.

(Please note that "shame" is often clinically defined as feeling bad about oneself rather than bad about what was done. Feeling bad about oneself can lead a person to see themselves as bad and unworthy. That feeling of "shame" should be challenged or else the personal feeling of "being bad" can lead to other negative behaviors that reenforce the feelings of shame which in turn leads one into the classic "one sin leads to another sin.")

Tenth of Tevet

This coming Tuesday, January 10, will be the Fast of the 10th of Tevet. This is the second fast-day commemorating the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash. The fast begins 72 minutes before sunrise and concludes 45 minutes after sunset. Eating and drinking are prohibited, but should an exemption be required due to illness or health related conditions contact your local Rabbi for possible consideration. Except for Yom Kippur which is Biblical, the other five fast-days are Rabbinically mandated. The Rabbis imposed the fast on all adults, both male and female. Contrary to popular thought, women are equally obligated to fast.

The Rest of the Story

Five tragic events occurred during the month of Tevet.

1. 1st of Tevet: In the year 3319 - 442 b.c.e., Yichoniah and the great scholars and prophets were exiled to Bavel.
2. 8th of Tevet: In the year 3515 -- 246 b.c.e., the Torah, as per the demand of Talmi, was translated into Greek (Septuagint) by 72 different Torah Scholars. His intention was to find inconsistencies that would undermine the power of the Rabbinic tradition. Instead, every one of the 72 translated the Torah in the exact same manner. The translation was completed on the 8th of Tevet and Chazal compared it to the day on which the Golden Calf was worshipped.
3. 9th of Tevet: In the year 3448 - 313 b.c.e., the great Ezra Hasofer died.
4. 10th of Tevet: In the year 3336 - 425 b.c.e., Nevuchadnetzar began the 2 and ½ year siege against Yerushalayim that ended in the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash.
5. 23rd of Tevet: In the year 5257 - 1497 c.e., the Jews of Portugal were expelled. Among those expelled was Rav Avraham Zacuto who had been consulted on astronomy and navigation by the explorer Vasco da Gama before a trip to India. Rav Yitzchak Karo, Uncle of Rav Yoseph Karo, was also among the refugees. (The Jewish Timeline, Rabbi Mattis Kantor)

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The author is the Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA, and Assistant Principal of YULA.