

TWO BROTHERS, TWO OPINIONS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

There is no more bitter quarrel than one within a family. The dynamics of family life, especially in a large family with strong feelings of competition between siblings, often times create dangerous situations among family members. The famous story of Yosef and his ten older brothers serve as a paradigm for the tensions, misunderstandings, paranoia and jealousy that can haunt even the best of families and the most devoted of parents and children. Great and holy people are blind to a brother's dreams and aspirations. They feel somehow threatened by his youthful exuberance and predictions of success and of having a dominant position in the family. They see him as an enemy, a threat to their very being and to the future of the Jewish people. Thus the tragic drama begins to unfold in the Torah reading of Vayeshev.

This story of Yosef and his brothers, particularly the roles of Yosef and Yehuda, vis a vis their own personal relationship does not end with the narrative of the Torah here in Bereshith. In later Jewish history, after the death of King Shlomo, the Jewish nation is split into two sections - the kingdom of Israel (Yosef) and the kingdom of Yehuda (the house of David.) Thus the competition between the two leading sons of Yakov's family, Yehuda and Yosef, survived centuries of attempted unity. And the eventual result of this split within the Jewish nation was disaster for both sections of that nation. Both sections of the nation were weakened, they had less sanguine influences on each other and they ultimately even went to war with each other, thus creating the woeful situation of Jews spilling the blood of other Jews.

It is a sad situation that is recorded for us in the Tanach. Yosef and Yehuda went their separate ways but the general Jewish nation suffered bitterly thereby. In the literature of the rabbis throughout the Middle Ages and even into our current era, the serious splits and disputes that seemingly have always plagued Jewish life were viewed as continuing echoes of the Yosef-Yehuda difficulty. The rabbis of the Talmud divided the messiah himself into two personages - Moshiach ben Yosef and Moshiach ben Dovid (a descendant of the tribe of Yehuda.) The former was to pave the way for the latter, but both were part of the envisioned messianic process. Apparently Jewish redemption and fulfillment is dependent on both Yosef and Yehuda and is destined to realization only if both are full participants in the process.

Yosef remains a holy Jew, in spite of his being exposed to the decadence of the prevailing Egyptian culture. He is an integral part of the Egyptian court and world, but he really is only an outsider looking in and not really desirous of "belonging" to the culture that surrounds him. Yosef is the model

for the Jew who is successful in the general world but doggedly determined to remain faithful to his own soul, tradition and destiny as a son of Yakov.

Yehuda is much more cautious and conservative. He has seen the outside world, the general society and is frightened to become part of it. Yehuda has lost sons, has suffered tragedy and disappointment, has made errors and risen from sin, and is willing to sacrifice all to remain Jewish and save other Jews. Yehuda does not wish to be Yosef. He sees Yosef's way as being too dangerous, too risky - certainly for the masses of Israel. Yosef, on the other hand, cannot see a future for Israel if it is completely isolated from the general society, of which it is a part, no matter what Israel's preference in the matter may be.

Yosef takes the risks and is successful in maintaining his Jewishness and in raising holy children and grandchildren, in the midst of the squalor of Egyptian culture. But Yehuda is also successful in his way and Yosef and Yehuda therefore march in lock step throughout Jewish history. They remain competitors and sometimes they have harsh things to say to and about each other and their different paths. But in the end, they are both the pillars of Jewish survival and society. They complement each other even if many times they do not utter compliments about each other. They are partners in the messianic and redemptive historical process of Jewish history. They are both still here with us today in our own personal and national struggle to build a Torah nation and a good world. We should appreciate their presence and influence upon us.

Shabat Shalom.

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