

GOD'S JUDGEMENT OF OUR INTENTIONS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

After the death of our father Yakov, the brothers sense a change in Yosef's attitude and behavior towards them. They are fearful that now that Yakov is gone, Yosef will wreak vengeance against them for their treatment of him many decades earlier. They therefore tell Yosef that Yakov commanded that he not be vengeful towards them. Yosef knows that this statement is not true. He weeps at having now to be forced to reconcile himself once more with his brothers. He comforts them by stating that "you may have thought in evil intent to harm me, but God thought this to be a great good for now I have been unable to sustain in life a great nation." How does this calm the brothers? Is their guilt somehow expunged simply because God arranged for a happy ending to their originally evil intent? We find in the Talmud that if a person intends to eat non-kosher food and accidentally, without knowledge or intent, actually eats kosher food, he is nonetheless obligated to bring a sin offering because of his evil intent. The rule for such a person is the same as for one who actually ate non-kosher food believing it to be kosher food. He too must bring a sin offering. So, what comfort is it to the brothers that their evil intent turned into a great favor for Yosef and themselves and the entire world at large? Are they not held liable for their bad intention just as in the case of the person eating kosher food, which he thought to be non-kosher?

Rabbi Meir Dan Plotzki (early twentieth century gaon in Warsaw) in his monumental work on Chumash, *Kli Chemda*, addresses this question. He provides us with the following insight. There is a great difference between sinning directly against God - eating non-kosher food - and sinning directly against a fellow human being (though this is also indirectly a sin against God) - selling a brother into slavery. When dealing with God Who knows our innermost thoughts, Who searches our hearts and minds and from Whom nothing is hidden, there is no difference between intent and actual behavior. We are taught that regarding the sin of *avodah zarah* - idolatry - even intent is culpable in God's eyes. The prophet said regarding this sin "To capture Israel in its own heart." For in our relationship with God the inside and the outside, the intent and the action are the same in His omniscience. However, when human beings deal one with another, no one knows the true intent of the other person. Human beings can only judge behavior on actuality and result. The Talmud teaches us a person who gives charity and help to others out of base or selfish motives is still considered to be a charitable person. Thus Yosef could correctly say to the brothers that their original intent is now really immaterial for the result has been a greater good. And in this he hoped they would find some comfort and conciliation.

We should always attempt to have good and holy intentions in all of our actions, both in matters relating directly to God or to human beings. But we should always remember that as far as human beings are concerned actions and results speak louder than words or intent. May all of our actions and intent be for the sake of the advancement of Torah and the sanctification of God's Name.

Shabat Shalom.

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