

HUMAN GREATNESS: ADMIT WRONG AND CHANGE DIRECTION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

As the Torah's narrative of the story of Yosef and his brothers reaches its dramatic climax in this week's parsha, one may feel justifiably surprised that the brothers were so shocked at Yosef's revelation to them. After all, there was no shortage of revelatory hints strewn by Yosef throughout the unfolding story.

But the brothers, convinced of the rectitude of their actions and behavior, remained insensitive to Yosef and his words, dreams and vision to the end. This fact of willful blindness, no matter what facts are unfolding before one's eyes, is not a rare occurrence in life. It is unfortunately a very common human characteristic.

The combination of self-righteousness, so-called ideological purity, human stubbornness and the reluctance to admit past error is a lethal mix. It corrupts thought and behavior and blinds the eyes, even of the righteous. The Torah describes the effects of venal monetary corruption thusly: "For graft will blind the sight of the otherwise righteous and pervert the utterances of the wise."

There is no greater graft or corruption than the self-righteousness of the ideologues amongst us. The brothers disbelieved Yosef's dreams from the onset and hardened their hearts and justified their behavior towards him. They convinced themselves that they could not have been wrong regarding such an important matter.

Blinded by their own convictions and worldview, of their exclusive role in creating the Jewish people without Yosef's participation, the brothers were blind to the facts that unfolded before their eyes. I am reminded of the sign that I once saw on the desk of a noted professor of law that said "Don't confuse me with the facts. My mind is made up!" Even the greatest among us fall into that trap.

There is a portion of the Jewish people who sincerely believe, whether for religious or ideological reasons, that the state of Israel should never have been created. Great rabbinic leaders of the past assured their followers that the state could not last longer than fifteen years or fifty years at the most. The facts thankfully belie those dark predictions and certainties.

There were ideologues on the left who said that by abandoning Marxism the state of Israel was doomed, as was the world of the Western democracies generally. Once again the facts of the matter have arisen to deny this skewed and dire viewpoint. All of the naysayers of the past still deny the present and continue to fight against the raging sea of facts that appear before their very eyes.

Twenty years after the Oslo agreements, it is apparent to all that somehow this process failed to bring even a modicum of peace to Israel and its Arab antagonists. Yet, having committed themselves to and having invested so much effort in a failed process there are still many who refuse to face the facts and recognize that their worldview and assessment of the situation was wrong.

So even when Yosef stands before you, one is blinded by one's own prejudices and previous mindset. This is a very important lesson to be learned from the narrative of the Torah. The ability to admit wrong and change direction is one of the true hallmarks of human greatness. It certainly is necessary in our time and in our circumstances.

Shabbat shalom

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