

AN IOTA OF JEALOUSY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 352, "Chamar Medina" -- Used for Kiddush? Good Shabbos!

The Power of an Iota of Jealousy

In this week's parsha we learn of one of the most problematic stories in the Torah -- the sale of Yosef by his brothers. We are paying for the dissension that existed in the Jewish people, which led to brother selling brother into slavery, until this very day. If we wonder why there is such constant dissension and division amongst us, it is because of the seeds that were sown on that fateful day.

It must be stated at the outset that in no way shape or form can we liken our petty disputes to the division that separated the brothers. We sometimes fight over terribly trivial things. We are ordinary people. The brothers were righteous pillars of the world. They are the foundation of our nation. We must never be guilty of superimposing our pettiness on the founders of the Tribes. Our Sages take pains to explain the nature of the situation between Yosef and his brothers. The approach is that the brothers deemed Yosef to have the status of a 'Rodef' [a pursuer bent on murder] and as such, they sat as a formal court that deliberated and sentenced Yosef to death and subsequently sold him. This was done because their best understanding of the situation was that Yosef presented a clear and present danger to the family.

In spite of all this, the Sages are troubled by the fact that the brothers made such a tragic mistake. There are not so many people in Jewish history who were given the title "HaTzadik" [the righteous one]. How could the brothers view one of their own flesh and blood, who was in fact righteous, as a potential threat?

The Sages point to the verse "And the brothers saw that their father loved him more than all the brothers and they hated him" [Bereishis 37:4]. The situation resulted from at least an iota, a drop, of jealousy. The Talmud advises that a father should never show even the slightest amount of favoritism between children because the perceived favoritism that Yaakov showed to Yosef ultimately led to our exile in Egypt [Shabbos 10b].

The following are the words of Rav Eliyahu Meir Bloch (1894-1955), the Telshe Rosh Yeshiva, zt"l: The Torah teaches us that the first seed of the mistake of the brothers flowed from a very natural human trait. In spite of the fact that these human beings reached great heights and purity of spirit, nevertheless their human traits were submerged deep inside their consciousness to the extent that they did not realize that they were there. They thought they were making a perfectly impartial judgment. We see from here how powerful nature's rule is, even over the greatest of people.

We thus see that even an iota of jealousy, in even a great person, can impact his ability to judge even a capital case. The practical lesson for us is clear. We may believe that we are thinking something through and we may believe that we are acting purely with the best intentions and for the Sake of G-d [l'Shem Shamayim]. But we as human beings must always question our motives. We are subject to feelings of jealousy, of questing for honor, and of the whole range of human emotions and character traits. Therefore we must remain on guard.

Rabbi Zev Leff quotes the following Talmudic incident [Brochos 28b]: When Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was deathly ill, his students came in to visit him. When he saw them he started to cry. They said to him "Candle of Israel, the Right Hand Pillar, the almighty hammer, why are you crying?" Rav Yochanan ben Zakai responded, "If they would be taking me before a mortal judge that is here today and gone tomorrow; who if he would be angry at me, it would only be for a small amount of time; if he tortures or kills me it is not permanent suffering; I would nevertheless cry (in trepidation). Certainly now that they are taking me before the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He who Lives forever, whose Anger is an eternal anger, and if he tortures me it will be eternal torture, and if he kills me it will be eternal death - should I not cry?

But the question must be asked, was Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai -- who was one of the greatest Tanaim -- really worried that G-d would kill him with eternal death? Was he really worried that he may deserve the punishment of Kares -- being cut off from any reward in the Afterworld? The sins that result in such punishment are clearly not transgressions that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai ever came close to violating. So is the meaning of this Gemara?

Rav Zev Leff suggests that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was worried about a single incident in his life that really bothered him. He knew that he was a pious Jew. He knew that he put on Tephillin. He knew that he kept the Torah.

That did not bother him. He was worried about the following incident. The Gemara [Gittin 56b] states that before the Beis Hamikdash [Temple] was destroyed, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was given the opportunity to ask the future Roman Caesar for a wish. Jerusalem was under siege and the Beis Hamikdash hung in the balance. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was told to make a wish and he would be granted whatever he wished. The Gemara relates that he asked for three things: He asked that the Yeshiva in Yavneh and its Sages be spared; he asked that the House of Rabban Gamliel be spared; and he asked for medical care for a sage named Rav Tzadok. He was granted all three

wishes.

The Gemara there asks the obvious question -- why didn't he ask that the Beis Hamikdash be spared? This question was discussed in the Talmud many years later. Some say that he was afraid to ask for the Beis Hamikdash, because he knew that they would not grant such a request. The conclusion of the Gemara however is that he made a mistake. Why did he make a mistake? G-d wanted the Beis Hamikdash destroyed. Through Divine Providence, G-d removed Rav Yochanan ben Zakai's insight to ask for the Beis Hamikdash at that moment.

Now, as Rabbi Yochanan was about to die and he looked back over his lifetime, he recognized that the most crucial decision of his lifetime was his requests to the Roman general. "Maybe I should have asked for the Beis Hamikdash, but I did not. Maybe the reason why I did not ask for the Beis Hamikdash was for personal reasons.

There was an internal struggle within the Jewish people at that time. There were great disagreements and strife between the elders of the community and the group called the 'Biryonim' [young Turks]. The Biryonim wanted to fight against the Romans. The Biryonim thought that they could prevail. Rav Yochanan ben Zakai told them that they were crazy. They would never be able to prevail. Rav Yochanan argued that we should try to make peace. (In fact, the Talmud relates that they had enough provisions to hold out for 21 years but the Biryonim destroyed all the storage of grain and wood - to force the Jews to fight).

History proved Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai to be right. The Jews lost when they fought the Romans. The Beis Hamikdash was destroyed. But, now on his deathbed, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was analyzing his motives in not asking for the Beis HaMikdash to be spared. "Maybe I did not ask for the Beis HaMikdash because I wanted history to prove me right in my argument against the Biryonim. Perhaps, subconsciously, it was my desire for the honor of being borne out by history that caused me to not ask for the Beis Hamikdash. Maybe it was a personal motive." If my decision was colored by personal motives then I lost the Beis Hamikdash for the Jewish people! Then I will be deserving of Eternal punishment at the Hand of G-d. That is why I am crying and that is why I am afraid.

The point is that even if someone is on the level of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, he still needs to ask himself some basic questions: Were my motives pure? Were my intentions proper? Did I make a mistake? Did my personal involvement ("negius") color my decision? It can happen to anyone.

This, says Reb Eliya Meir Bloch, was the downfall of the brothers. This was not gross and coarse sibling rivalry, but a miniscule amount of jealousy. Sometimes that is all that it takes to color a perception and to color a decision to the extent that they could feel that Yosef was out to get them and as such they could feel justified in condemning him to death.

Even the greatest of human beings - even the Tribes of G-d - are unfortunately prone to the pitfalls and foibles of all mankind. They are subject to be influenced by things like jealousy, lust, and honor that can drive a person from the world [Avos 4:21].

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Vayeishev are provided below:

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