

YOSEF PROVIDES US WITH A LESSON IN ETIQUETTE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Yosef Provides Us With A Lesson In Etiquette

When Yosef finally reveals himself to his brothers, they are shocked and frightened. He tries to console them by telling them "It was not you who sent me down here, but G-d; He has made me father to Pharaoh, master of his entire household, and ruler throughout the entire land of Egypt." [Bereishis 45:8].

Rav Yerucham Levovitz cites an interesting Medrash in Parshas Tetzaveh in reference to this pasuk [verse]. G-d gave the mitzvah of lighting the Menorah in the Beis HaMikdash to the Jewish people. The Medrash states "It is not that I need the light of the Menorah. I am, after all, the Light of the World. Rather, I command you to light for Me just as I provided illumination for you (in the Wilderness). This will give you the opportunity to return the favor, so to speak."

Rav Yerucham says that we learn a powerful lesson in proper etiquette from this Medrash. When someone does a tremendous favor for his friend, the beneficiary may approach the benefactor and ask how he might be able to repay the kindness. What is the proper response of a benefactor in such a situation?

Most people would say that the proper response is to shrug off the favor and say, "Forget about it! Don't worry! You don't have to pay me back." This Medrash teaches otherwise. The proper response is in fact to suggest a way in which the beneficiary can pay the benefactor back. Someone who is truly sensitive for the feelings of his friend will not want the friend to feel indebted.

If you do not give to the beneficiary the opportunity to return a favor, the relationship will remain as one of debtor and benefactor. Deep down, the benefactor is thinking "this guy still owes me big time," and the beneficiary is thinking the same thing. Maintaining such a relationship is not proper

etiquette. It is not being a mensch. A person with outstanding character traits will tell his beneficiary, "You know, there is something you CAN do for me..."

Even if that which the beneficiary will do in return is not as significant or as important a favor, it at least gives the person the opportunity to feel "I've paid him back," so that the recipient does not have to go through life thinking, "I owe this guy. I owe this guy. I owe this guy."

This is what G-d is teaching by asking Klal Yisrael for a "favor" - to light a light for Him in His Temple. We would not have been able to move 5 feet forward in the Wilderness without G-d's Light. What is more, He doesn't need our light. But nevertheless, in His Kindness, He gave us an opportunity to "pay Him back."

The Rosh, in the Orchos Chaim l'ha'Rosh, states that not only does this have ramifications when someone does us a favor -- it also has implications when someone commits an offense against us. The Orchos Chaim consists of very cryptic sayings from the Rosh. In this case, he says, "Don't consider it a sin if a person wishes to excuse himself in front of you."

The scenario that the Rosh is speaking of is when Reuvain hurts Shimon in a very profound way. Two weeks later, Reuvain comes before Shimon and says, "You know, I realize I acted horribly towards you, but - I want to explain."

Again, what is our normal reaction to such a situation? "Forget it. I don't want to hear your explanation. I don't need to hear your explanation. It is done already - just forget it!" The Rosh explains that reacting in that way is not practicing exemplary midos. Shimon is refusing to hear the explanation because he wants Reuvain to suffer. He knows that from this point forward, every time Reuvain sees him, he will feel bad. Shimon, by not being willing to listen to Reuvain's explanation is setting up a future relationship where Reuvain will always "owe him something."

Therefore, the Rosh says, if a person sins against you and comes to explain - do not consider this a further sin on his part. On the contrary, hear him out. Listen to his excuse - whether it is a good excuse or not. Even if his excuse is total nonsense, let him say it anyway. Let him have the satisfaction of being let off the hook, as though he in fact settled his debt to you. Such a practice represents super character traits. One who is prepared to let his neighbor "off the hook," even if perhaps he does not deserve to get off so easy, is most praiseworthy.

Rav Yerucham finds an example of this in Yosef's response here to his brothers. Imagine how the ten brothers felt. They took Yosef, intending to kill him. In the end, they sold him into slavery. Their behavior toward him was almost inexcusable. What can they say to him now? What kind of apology can they hope to offer under such circumstances?

Yosef tells them, "You did not sin toward me. It all turned out for the best. This was all part of G-d's Divine plan. You were just pawns - puppets in the hands of the puppeteer." Yosef was attempting to relieve his brothers of their unbelievable burden of guilt. This, says Rav Yeruchem, demonstrates the pristine quality of the midos of Yosef haTzadik.

What's Your Hurry?

Before sending them back to Canaan, Yosef gave his brothers the following instructions: "Do not become agitated on the way" (al tirgezu b'derech) [Bereishis 45:24]. The Gemara [Ta'anis 10b] interprets these words to mean "Do not take big steps". What does this mean?

The Kotzker Rebbe explains that Yosef knew exactly what was going through his brothers' minds. They just found out that Yosef was still alive. They knew what this would mean to their father. These were the days before the telephone, before the telegram, and before other means of instant communication that we have today. It took several days to travel from Egypt back to Eretz Canaan. They were thinking, "We can't wait to tell our father the news. This is a three day trip. We are going to make it in a day and a half!" Yosef therefore told them to travel at a normal pace.

Why? The Kotzker explains that when G-d brings suffering upon a person, He decrees that the suffering will end on such and such a day at such and such an hour at such and such a minute and at such a such a second. It will not depart a moment earlier or a moment later. Therefore, it does not help for them to think that they can make it happen quicker. The exact amount of time that Yaakov had to suffer thinking his son was murdered was preordained. If the brothers would have tried to speed up or take short cuts, they would not have gotten there any sooner.

The Imrei Shammai cites a similar explanation from the Baal HaTurim. According to the Baal HaTurim, Yosef's message when he told his brothers "Al Tirgezu b'Derech" was: don't go through fields that have already been sown. In other words, don't think you are on such a holy and urgent mission that it justifies stepping on someone's corn crop thinking "this is important! So what if this guy has a little less corn this year?" Yosef instructed them, "don't do that. Don't use your connections with the viceroy in Egypt to justify physical or moral shortcuts. Stay on the main highway. Don't take special privileges. Shortcuts are not going to help. It will happen whenever it is going to happen."

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