SPARING EMBARRASSMENT OF HIS BROTHERS WAS WORTH THE RISK

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayigash

Sparing Embarrassment Of His Brothers Was Worth The Risk

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 794, Must I Always Stand for the Rov? Good Shabbos!

After hearing Yehudah's emotional plea, when Yosef finally broke down and told his brothers, "I am Yosef, is my father still alive?" he made a point of first sending everyone else out from the room so that he was alone with his brothers. Rashi explains that he did not want the Egyptians to see his brothers embarrassed when he revealed his identity to them.

This was obviously a terribly embarrassing moment for the brothers. In the words of our Rabbis, that very moment, which is one of the most dramatic moments in the entire narrative portion of the Torah, is a prototype for the type of great embarrassment we may all suffer on the future Day of Judgment.

The Medrash [Bereishis Rabbah 93] quotes an opinion that Yosef did not act wisely at that moment. His action in sending out everyone from the room, according to this line of reasoning, was considered reckless. After all, the brothers and he had a history. They tried to kill him in the past. He sent out all his bodyguards. They could try to kill him again now and he would have no protection.

A second opinion quoted by the Medrash is that Yosef did act appropriately by clearing the room before revealing himself to his brothers. He was confident his brothers would not kill him. He knew that they were not murderers and they were not terrorists.

The question is - according to the first opinion that Yosef took a tremendous risk in sending his officers out of the room - why did he do that? The answer is that Yosef was acting based on the principle "It is preferable for a person to throw himself into a fiery furnace rather than to embarrass his fellow man publicly" [Sotah 10b]. Yosef knew it was a risk, but he felt it was a risk he had to take.

Mr. Avi Shulman from Torah U'Messorah recently told me the following story: There is a well-known

educator who was asked which of his own teachers had the greatest influence on him as a student. Without hesitating, he identified his fifth grade teacher. He related the following incident. They were in class and there were a number of children who the Rebbe could not quiet down. The Rebbe went to the blackboard and wrote down the name of each child who was misbehaving. He told them, "After class you are going to get it!" Lo and behold, a few minutes later, the principal of the school happened to walk into the classroom on an unscheduled visit and decided to give the students a little test. The principal stood in front of the blackboard asking the questions and the Rebbe - behind the principal's back walked back and forth brushing up against the blackboard until the names were erased. When the principal finished and the teacher walked him out of the classroom, the entire class saw that the Rebbe's suit was all white from chalk. He did it so that the children would not be embarrassed in front of the principal. He would rather have to pay for the dry cleaning of the jacket than be responsible for the embarrassment of his students. This demonstration of a Rebbi caring for his students, being sensitive to their feelings, and sparing them embarrassment made a profound impression on this future world-class educator.

Cutting Out The Middle Man Made All The Difference!

We are all familiar with the story at the beginning of Vayigash of Yehudah approaching Yosef. When we left off at the end of last week's parsha, the situation seemed desperate. Yosef said that he was going to keep Binyamin. The brothers knew that this would mean that Yaakov would not be able to deal with it and would die in grief for the double loss of the two children of his favorite wife.

Yehudah therefore approaches Yosef at the beginning of the parsha and makes his "speech". However, anyone who has followed the narrative in the last couple of parshios will realize that this speech consists of nothing more than a repetition of all that has been said until now. There is nothing new in this speech. No new element; no new argument. Everything is already well known.

And yet, something happened. Yosef broke down when he heard this speech. He could take it no longer, started crying, and revealed himself to his brothers. What happened? What changed here?

Before answering this question, let us make another observation.

Yehudah uses a peculiar expression here. "Let me say something INTO THE EARS OF MY MASTER." What do these extra words come to add?

Let us note something else: "Like you, so is Pharaoh." (ki kamocha, k'Paroh). Rashi gives 4 different interpretations of this phrase: (1) You are yourself like a King; (2) Just like Pharaoh was smitten with leprosy when he kept Sara against her will, you too will be smitten with leprosy; (3) Just like Pharaoh does not keep his promises, you too do not keep your promises; (4) I will kill you and I will kill Pharaoh as well.

The Mizrachi asks on Rashi: We say that the Torah has 70 different facets (Ayin panim l'Torah), but it

is rare to find two interpretations that are diametrically opposed to one another. First, Rashi interprets ki kamocha k'Paroh very positively: I respect you like Pharaoh; you are a King in my eyes like Pharaoh. Then Rashi says it means, "I will kill you like Pharaoh", you are a liar like Pharaoh, you will get leprosy like Pharaoh. That is a total negation of the first interpretation! It is rare to find interpretations on the same expression that are so diametrically opposed.

I saw the following thought in the Sefer Heimah Yenachamuni by the Tolner Rebbe, who quotes several earlier sources as well: The answer to all of this can be found in the words of a Medrash. The Medrash compares this incident to a pasuk in Iyov [41:8] "Two people will approach one another and (they are so close that even) air does not come between them." What does that mean?

Chazal say hat the superiority of mankind over animals stems from the fact that we can speak. People can communicate. Now the truth is that animals communicate as well. It is not sophisticated communication but it is communication nevertheless. So what do the Rabbis mean when they speak of man as being unique in the fact that only he "speaks"? The answer is that animals and birds can communicate and transfer very basic information, but they cannot share feelings. They cannot share emotions.

The Targum translates the pasuk "and man was a living being" [Bereishis 2:7] as "l'ruach memallelah" - beings capable of expressing emotions to one another, thoughts, feelings, not mere transfer of information. Geese can transfer information through their squawking: "Hey guys, we're going now!" But a goose cannot tell another goose how he is feeling or what he thinks of the other goose. That capability separates man from the animal kingdom.

There is a vast difference whether we are talking to someone directly or whether someone is standing in between the speaker and the listener. The halacha requires that members of the Sanhedrin know all 70 languages in order that they not need to hear testimony through an interpreter. As opposed to the American legal system, Jewish jurisprudence rules "by their mouth and not by their writing": Witnesses must speak their testimony directly to the court. They cannot submit a written deposition.

The deposition is merely a statement of facts. But the Sanhedrin must KNOW what the witnesses are saying. They must know whether the people are telling the truth. The only way to do that is through speech - direct speech, people communicating to each other.

Rav Yitzchak Smelkes explains: Until now, there was an interpreter between Yosef and his brothers, but now Yehudah approached Yosef and said, "Let your servant speak words INTO THE EARS of my master." No more interpreters. I want to talk to you directly - into your ears! I want you to hear from my mouth and I do not care whether you understand Hebrew or not. I want you to hear it from my mouth.

"I will prove it to you Yosef, with the words 'Ki Kamocha k-Pharoah'. How is your interpreter going to interpret that? (You are great like Pharaoh? You are a liar like Pharaoh? You are a scoundrel like

Pharaoh? I am going to kill you like Pharaoh?) Here are three words that can be interpreted in a myriad of ways! I do not know what the interpreter will be telling you, but I want you to listen to me directly."

Yosef sent the interpreter away and everything changed. Yehudah, speaking directly to Yosef was able to convey the depths of emotions and the depths of anxiety and worry that Yosef had never really heard before. That is what changed.

There is a famous story with the Chofetz Chaim, z"l. At the end of his life, the Communist Government passed a decree that the Russian language had to be taught in Yeshivas. The Torah leaders of that generation viewed this to be a terrible spiritual threat to the Jewish people. The Choftez Chaim, together with a delegation of Rabbis went to the minister of education to plead the case on behalf of the Yeshivos.

The Chofetz Chaim was the elder Rabbinic statesmen of that generation. The plan was that he would come in to give words of blessing to the Minister of Education in Yiddish and then the other Rabbis of the delegation would present their case to the minister in Russian. However, the Chofetz Chaim deviated from the script. He came in and did not suffice with words of greeting but he made an impassioned plea to the minister in Yiddish to rescind the decree. The minister did not understand a word that the Chofetz Chaim said. However, when the Chafetz Chaim finished and the other Rabbis began their presentation in Russian, the minister told them to forget it. "You do not need to tell me anything, I will waive the decree for your community." Somehow the Chofetz Chaim was able to powerfully communicate the message even though he delivered it in a language that was totally foreign to the minister. The minister changed his mind and the decree did not go through.

This is what happened with Yehudah and Yosef as well. Until now, there was an interpreter between them. Yehudah felt that the message was not getting through. He therefore insisted, "No more interpreters. You are going to listen to me!" That changed the day.

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 Vayigash are provided below:

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