

PARSHAS MIKETZ - UNFINISHED BUSINESS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Unfinished Business¹

Yosef remembered the dreams he had dreamt about them. He said to them, "You are spies! You have come to observe the nakedness of the land!"

We are tempted to scream out to Yosef, "No, don't do it! Your dreams are only significant because they originate with Hashem. He doesn't need your help in making them come about. You don't have to torment your brothers for the future to bring what it must. G-d has many ways of making sure that events comply with His Will."

We might add for good effect that we cannot understand why, in all the years that he occupied a position of power he did not find a way to use his office to send a message to his father that he was still alive[2].

Returning to our shock and indignation over this pasuk, we would summarize and conclude, "Yosef! The dreams are none of your business!"

The dreams, in fact, were his business. They were essential business to not only Yosef, but to all his brothers as well as his father. How he handled that business is a testimony to his cleverness and penetrating intellect.

He could, indeed, have identified himself to his shocked brothers. They would have recovered in time. He could then have sent for Yaakov, and set them all up with attractive sinecures and a family estate in Goshen. It would have been, on the surface of things, a comfortable way of life for all concerned.

Appearances, however, would not have betrayed the family dynamic that would have played itself out in every interaction they would have from that moment on. They would always mistrust and fear him, as they did when he was younger, and their suspicions had far less foundation. Now, as viceroy of Egypt, he had the power to rule over them - indeed to do with them whatever he pleased.

It would not be more pleasant from his point of view. Every "Good morning" he received from them would be stab and a twist. "What did they mean by that? Is their friendliness just camouflage for their true sentiment? Do they secretly despise me, and plot to finish what they began decades ago?"

They could be reunited, but that would not turn them into a fully functional family.

Yosef demanded for all concerned that feelings of mutual love and trust be restored to the family. For this to happen, he knew that two things had to change. He remembered the dreams, and the fear and hatred that they had stirred in his siblings. That damage had to be undone. He had to view them very differently from what they looked like to him, peering down at him in the pit into which they had thrown him - and oblivious to the grief that his loss would cause their father. They, in turn, had to regard him differently than as the power-hungry usurper they saw in his dreams, who threatened their safety and security.

Yosef set out to accomplish both changes. He guessed - and hoped - that in the course of time, his brothers would have reconsidered some of their attitudes. He hoped that they would have developed a familial glue that bound them together. How could he assure himself that this was true? He would give them even greater cause to sacrifice one of them for the benefit of the others than they had had when he was the perceived threat. He would watch and see how they would comport themselves. Years before, he offered no more than a distant threat to them. What if they faced an open-ended imprisonment, and the starvation of their hungry families back in Canaan? Would they perform the same cold calculus as before, and abandon one of them? He put this to the test, by entrapping Binyamin, and watching for their reactions. He was able to reassure himself that the brothers had in fact changed - that they were willing to risk their own lives for Binyamin, rather than leave him behind.

He had a plan as well to change their view of him and his dreams. They saw him as a pretender to a fictional throne, from which he would lord it over them. This would be an unconscionable assault on their freedom, as well as dashing hope for the success of their mission. He waited until his power was not imaginary, but backed by the authority of the Egyptian monarchy. He waited until he had them in a compromised position, when he would have been justified in crushing them, if that is what he really wanted to do. Precisely when it was clear to them that he had the ability to harm them it he wanted, he showed in a most dramatic way that his heart belonged to them, and that he would not use his power against them, consistent with their understanding of his dreams.

In this treatment of his brothers in this incident, Yosef showed that he had become a great statesman, who would use his diplomatic insight for the benefit not only of his host country, but for his beloved family.

-
1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 42:9
 2. Interestingly, the Abarbanel, who served in the court of several monarchs, criticizes those who asked the question. Those familiar with the intrigue of court life know all too well that a foreigner or other suspect person working in the inner circle of trusted court personnel would put his life in danger by sending any message out of the country. He would be seen as a foreign agent.

