

MIKEITZ (GENESIS 41:1-44:17)

Holy Gangsters

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Things aren't always as they seem to be.

A superficial reading of the Torah and the Prophets can give us a very jaded view of the lives and characters of Biblical personalities. Without a thorough understanding of the events being described, it is very easy to come away from the text with a cynical and distorted picture. We can, for example, come to make the mistake, G-d forbid, of seeing David and Samson as bloodthirsty and lustful barbarians (an opinion shared by many self-appointed Biblical "experts").

One case in point is the rivalry between Joseph and his brothers. Last week's and this week's Torah Portions seem to indicate to us that Jacob naively played favorites among his sons. Joseph comes across as an arrogant and immature show-off who shares his dreams of someday being his brothers' ruler. The brothers act like petty thugs who will stop at nothing, including murder, to silence Joseph's illusions of grandeur.

THE STORY: In last week's Torah Reading, Joseph's brothers decide to get rid of him. At Reuben's urging, they decide not to actually do the dirty work themselves. Instead they leave him to die in a hole in the ground. Finally, at Judah's suggestion, they make a few dollars by selling him as a slave. Joseph, through a series of "coincidences," ends up as a ruler in Egypt. In this week's Torah Portion, there is a famine. Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to buy food from the Viceroy of Egypt, a bearded fellow by the name of *Tzofnas Paneach*. "*Tzofnas Paneach*" is, of course, none other than their kid brother Joseph, whom they haven't seen since he was a smooth-faced 17-year-old twenty-two years ago. They don't recognize him, and this government bureaucrat begins to fulfill his dream of becoming their ruler. He accuses them of being spies, and imprisons them.

THE MISIMPRESSION: This story makes great reading. It would make a great novel and an even better soap opera. It's got love, it's got hate, it's got jealousy, and best of all, it tells us: "Don't get mad; get even!"

THE TRUTH: The Torah tells us that the 12 sons of Jacob were *Tzadikim*, righteous men. Had they not been so, they would not have become the Tribes of Israel. Had they been unworthy, G-d would have chosen just one of them, presumably Joseph, to be the fourth Patriarch of Israel. The Tribes would have descended only from Joseph's sons. Like their uncle Esau Jacob's brother, and like their great-uncle Ishmael, Isaac's brother, the brothers of Joseph would have disappeared into relative obscurity.

Why had they tried to kill him twenty-two years before? The brothers had convened a *Sanhedrin*, a Rabbinical Court. The court sought to examine the case of their brother Joseph who kept talking about his dreams that they would some day bow down to him. He used to report what he considered to be misdeeds to their father. He misunderstood them and they misunderstood him.

It was Divinely ordained that Judah and his descendants would be the kings of the Jewish nation. The brothers saw Joseph's actions as a plot to usurp Judah's prerogative and to eliminate the brothers from the Nation of Israel. Torah law requires the death penalty for someone who attempts to overthrow the legitimate king of Israel. The brothers ruled that Joseph had to die. However, they ended up showing him **clemency** by sparing his life and selling him instead.

(You can read another explanation of Joseph's brothers' actions at “Blessings and Curses on the West Bank”.)

And now, twenty-two years later, Joseph, pretending to be a harsh Egyptian tyrant, wanted to determine if his brothers had repented their actions. The Torah tells us that he wept as he overheard their reaction to their predicament:

They said to each other, *“Indeed we are guilty concerning our brother since we saw his heartfelt anguish when he pleaded with us and we paid no heed. This is why this distress has come upon us.”* (Genesis 42:21)

They saw their current dilemma as Divine retribution for not showing more consideration on that fateful day twenty-two years before.

TWENTY-TWO YEARS BEFORE!! The Midrash tells us that they had carefully examined their deeds of the last 22 years. They could not find a single sin for which they deserved such punishment. They concluded that their sin must have been that they should have been even more compassionate toward Joseph. They should have done more than spared his life; they should have let him go.

TWENTY-TWO YEARS BEFORE!! A person is supposed to review his actions and analyze where one can find room for improvement. Our rabbis tell us that when things don't work out as we wish, we should scrutinize our conduct and see if we can figure out where we've gone wrong. We are required to do this every Yom Kippur, but we should really do it every day.

TWENTY-TWO YEARS BEFORE!! How many of us are able to do a fair, frank and open evaluation of everything we have done in the last twenty-two years and not find a sin?!

Our Sages tell us that we can see the greatness of the sons of Jacob by observing their candor and their remorse. We should not read the Torah superficially and view these people by the standards of today's society. We should look at these men as the giants they were; spiritual titans who were willing to be

honest about the fact that they had erred, and accepted their difficulties as G-d's will.

It is easy to open a *Chumash* (Bible) and be critical of Biblical personalities. As for myself, I'm not quite ready to attack Joseph's brothers. Once I reach the point when I can state, honestly, that I haven't sinned in twenty-two years, I may decide to reconsider that position.

Have a great Shabbos.

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