

VAYECHI (GENESIS 47:28-50:26)

Payback Time

2004 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

[INTRODUCTION: I am always apprehensive about citing Biblical or Talmudic references that are critical of Biblical personalities. We must be extremely wary of viewing the Patriarchs in the same way that we look at our contemporaries. It is important to remember that Jacob was a man who wrestled with an angel. Judah and Joseph and his brothers were chosen by G-d to lead the Tribes of Israel. These people were barely mortal; the Talmud says that we would be more accurate in viewing them almost as angels. When the Torah speaks of misdeeds by these spiritual giants, it refers to conduct that might not even be recognizable to us as inappropriate. Rather, it is just that G-d holds the righteous to a higher standard. Therefore, actions that are “microscopically” incorrect are magnified in perspective. For a fuller discussion of this concept, see “Holy Gangsters” and “Watch your Step!”]*

Revenge, they say, is a dish best served cold.

Jacob’s funeral was over, and his twelve sons were back in Egypt. Joseph had been very patient. His brothers, who had sold him as a slave (See “Pro-Choice” and “Blessings and Curses on the West Bank”) nearly four decades ago, were now under his control. Joseph was the Viceroy of Egypt, the second most powerful man on earth. For twenty-two years after the sale, they had been separated. The brothers were in Canaan with their father, while Joseph served first as a slave, and later as a prison inmate. In the seventeen years since their reunion, in the presence of their father Jacob, Joseph had treated his brothers well. But now, Jacob was dead. It was payback time.

Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, and they said, “Perhaps Joseph will nurse hatred against us and then he will surely repay us all the evil that we did him.” (Genesis, 50:15)

They had reason to be concerned. Joseph just wasn’t acting the same. The twelve brothers had traveled together to their father’s funeral. That was when Joseph began to change. First, there was the detour. The Midrash Tanchuma tells us that on the way back to Egypt, Joseph stopped to see the pit into which they had thrown him some thirty-nine years before. Joseph stood there, gazing into that snake-and-scorpion-infested hole in the ground that had once served as his holding pen. Obviously, he had not forgotten about what his brothers had done.

And then there was dinner. In Jacob's lifetime, the entire family had dined with Joseph. Now that Jacob was gone, the invitations ceased. (Midrash Rabba, 100:8) Clearly, Joseph was not happy with his brothers. What could he be planning? Had he taken his cue from their Uncle Esau, who had designated the anticipated demise of his father as an opportune moment to kill his brother?

The brothers felt that they had to do some damage control. They fabricated a story and sent an emissary to deliver it to Joseph:

"Your father gave orders before his death, saying, 'Tell Joseph: "Please, kindly forgive the spiteful deed of your brothers and their sin, for they have done you evil." ' "... and Joseph cried when they spoke to him. (Ibid, verse 17)

Why was Joseph crying? Was it the pain and resentment that he still carried as a result of his brothers' actions? Was he recalling his fear as he cowered in that pit thirty-nine years ago in fear for his life? Did he cry as he remembered being treated like chattel, a possession to be sold as a slave to the highest bidder? Did his tears flow as he relived the frustration of being thrown into an Egyptian prison for a crime that he didn't commit? Was it not truly payback time? Was it not finally the time to administer to his brothers the sweet revenge that they so justly deserved?!

Actually, he cried because he knew the story wasn't true. He cried because his brothers suspected him of wanting to harm them. He then went to great lengths to explain to them, as he had in the past, that he wasn't angry with them. He couldn't be angry with them; they were merely carrying out the will of G-d. Their decision to send him to Egypt had set in motion a chain of events that now made it possible for Joseph to provide sustenance to their families.

So why the detour to the hole in the ground? Why did Joseph stare into the hole where he almost died? When a person experiences a miracle, he is supposed to thank G-d. Joseph went to the pit to recite a blessing *"Blessed are You ... Who performed a miracle for me in this place."* Yes, he remembered the pit; not because of his brothers' treachery; rather for G-d's kindness.

Why did he stop eating with his brothers? Joseph had a dilemma. In their father's lifetime, Jacob had insisted that Joseph sit at the head of the table. Joseph was not comfortable with that arrangement. After all, Reuben was the Firstborn and Judah was the king. Joseph felt that it would be more appropriate for them to occupy seats of honor. However, Joseph would not defy his father. Now that Jacob was gone, Joseph would no longer sit in ahead of Reuben and Judah. On the other hand, as an Egyptian ruler, he couldn't violate protocol by seating them ahead of himself. In order to prevent this conflict, he avoided the situation entirely by not eating with them. It was an act of respect for their feelings, not an act of resentment.

Once again Joseph's brothers had misunderstood him. The last thing he wanted was to harm his beloved brothers. He loved and respected them. He thanked G-d for allowing things to fall into place as they had.

(There are some who would question Joseph's attitude. Why turn the other cheek? If they treated him so poorly, why did he absolve them of guilt?

He didn't. In fact, the whole episode of pretending to suspect Benjamin of stealing from him and threatening to keep him as a slave was a test to see if they would come to their younger brother's defense. He wanted to see if they had repented and changed their ways. He DID reprimand them for what they had done. When someone wrongs you, it is appropriate to reprimand them. But you don't dwell on what they did wrong. You move on.)

One last question. The Commentaries tell us that Joseph cried when he heard the false report that Jacob had asked him to forgive his brothers. Why the tears? How did he know that his brothers suspected his intentions? Maybe Jacob really did leave that message! How did Joseph know that Jacob hadn't asked him to forgive them?

The reason Joseph knew that his father hadn't sent him that message is that it was impossible. It COULDN'T be true. Joseph knew for a fact that Jacob would never have asked Joseph to forgive his brothers for selling him. It was impossible because Jacob didn't know about the sale. Joseph had never told him!

Jacob and Joseph had been separated for twenty-two years. Jacob assumed that his beloved son Joseph was dead. He had mourned his son for twenty-two years. Suddenly he discovered that Joseph was alive and well! Surely he must have wondered what had happened. Surely Jacob wanted to know how Joseph became separated from his family so many years ago.

From the time Jacob had arrived in Egypt until his death seventeen years later, Joseph had taken care never to be alone with his father. He wanted to make sure that Jacob never had a chance to ask him what had happened. He didn't want Jacob to know what his sons had done!

Therefore, when Joseph heard the message from Jacob asking him to forgive his brothers for selling him, he knew it couldn't possibly be true.

Many Biblical personalities are referred to with titles. Moses is known as "*Moshe Rabbeinu* -- Moses, our Teacher." We have "*Avraham Avinu* -- Abraham our Father" and "*Eliyahu Hanavi* -- Elijah the Prophet."

Then there's Joseph. His brothers had misinterpreted his actions and acted to get rid of him. Although they were wrong, he accepted their actions as G-d's will. He supported them financially and honored them. He went to great lengths to protect their feelings. He even went so far as to keeping the whole episode a secret from their father. He wanted to spare his brother's from their father's anger.

Is it any wonder that he is known as *Yoseph Hatzadik* -- Joseph the Righteous?

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

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