

VAYECHI (GENESIS 47:28-50:26)

Forgotten but Not Forgiven?

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Someone I know was attending Services in a crowded synagogue in Jerusalem. While taking the required three steps back at the end of the prayer, a fellow accidentally stepped on his toes.

“*Slichah!*” (literally, “forgiveness,” in other words “I’m sorry”), said the toe-stepper.

Since it was during a part of the Service when it is preferred not to speak, the fellow simply nodded in a way that indicated, “It’s okay, don’t worry about it.”

Well, it WASN’T okay, and he DID worry about it. “*Tagid ‘Salachti!’*” (“Say, ‘I forgive you!’”)

Only after the “aggrieved party” officially forgave the toe-stepper did he relent. “*Salachti,*” he said, and the incident was over.

After Services, the “forgiver” asked the “forgiven” why he was so concerned about the official pronouncement of forgiveness. He responded by quoting the Commentary of Rabbeinu Bachya on this week’s Torah Portion.

Joseph’s brothers were nervous.

Over the past few weeks we have been reading about the string of events that brought the Nation of Israel from the famine-racked Land of Canaan to a safe haven in Egypt. Joseph’s brothers misunderstood Joseph, (See “Pro-Choice” and “Blessings and Curses on the West Bank”) . . .

*leading them to decide to sell him as a slave,

*leading Joseph to be brought to Egypt and sold to a government official,

*leading to his master’s wife trying to seduce him,

*leading to Joseph being thrown into prison when she fabricated stories about him,

*leading him to interpret the dreams of the king’s butler,

*leading the butler to tell the king about Joseph when the king had disturbing dreams,

*leading Joseph to be brought before the king, (See “I Have a Dream”)

*leading him to be chosen by the king to be the second in command of all of Egypt,

*leading Joseph to be able to bring his entire family over from the “old country”, and provide them with full support.

For the seventeen years that their father lived in Egypt, Joseph was nice to them. However, now that Jacob was dead, Joseph’s brother’s felt that the time may have finally arrived for Joseph to take revenge for what they had done.

They needn’t have feared.

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)

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... But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid; am I in place of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good, in order to accomplish ... that a great nation survive. So don’t be afraid; I will support you and your children.” Thus he comforted them and spoke to their hearts. (Ibid, verses 17, 19-21) (See “Payback Time”).

So, all’s well that ends well, right? Everyone recognizes that the sale of Joseph was part of G-d’s divine plan to provide for the People of Israel during the famine. Yes, they did something wrong, but it was G-d’s will, and Joseph wasn’t angry. Everything’s okay, right?

Well, not exactly. There is one thing missing. As the rabbi in Jerusalem told my friend, “*Tagid ‘Salachti!’*” -- “Say, ‘I forgive you!’”

The Midrash tells us that Joseph’s brothers were eventually punished by G-d for selling their brother. Rabbeinu Bachya writes that the reason they were punished was due to a technicality. Yes, Joseph “... *comforted them and spoke to their hearts.*” He supported them and protected them. But he never told them, “I forgive you.”

Why were those three words, “I forgive you,” so important? Isn’t it sufficient that he made peace with them? Isn’t it enough that he showed them, with his words and his actions, that he bore no malice toward them?

I would like to suggest an answer. People hurt other people every day. Some times in a big way, some times in a “small” way. “Oh, I’m sorry.” “It’s okay.” “Oops! Excuse me.” “No problem.” “Please forgive me.” “Don’t worry about it.”

Maybe the reason we have to be forgiven is that when the other fellow says, “Don’t worry about it”, I haven’t earned complete forgiveness. After all, if I hurt you, I SHOULD worry about it. Until I hear you say that you have forgiven me, I may not yet appreciate that THERE IS SOMETHING THAT NEEDS TO BE FORGIVEN.

Perhaps Joseph let them off the hook too easily. Maybe by not fully acknowledging the scope of their offense, Joseph deprived his brothers of the opportunity to show full remorse. Perhaps he should have said, “Yes, my dear brothers. What you did was wrong. Very wrong. You sinned. And in order for you to repent properly, it is essential that you know what you did to me. But I forgive you with all my heart, and I pray that G-d, too, will forgive you .”

On the Eve of Yom Kippur, we pray to G-d for forgiveness for all of our sins, whether they are sins against Him, or sins against His children. In a prayer which is recited before Yom Kippur, we declare that we forgive all who have hurt us, and we ask G-d to inspire those whom we have hurt to forgive us as well.

As a hot-headed 18-year-old, I once sent someone an insulting letter. Over three decades later, it still bothers me. I have brought it up to him and his wife on various occasions, and he shrugged it off. But, now that I think about it, I never heard them say “We forgive you.”

I better find their email address and send them a copy of this Torah Talk!

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz