**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYESHEV**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Towards the beginning of Parashat Vayeishev, we read of the dreams that Yosef dreamt which foretold his future status of leader and ruler over his brothers. In the first dream, Yosef and his brothers were gathering sheaves of grain, when suddenly the brothers’ sheaves bowed to his (37:7).

One commonly overlooked detail of Yosef’s dream is the fact that before the brothers’ sheaves bowed to Yosef’s, his sheaf “rose and then stood in place.” Rashi explains this to mean that it first stood up straight, and was then firmly planted into place. Only then did his brothers’ sheaves then turn around to bow to his.

Clearly, this first stage of Yosef’s vision symbolizes his rise to power in Egypt. Yosef’s dream prophetically foresaw not merely his brothers’ prostrating themselves before him, but also his rise to the position of vizier in Egypt, after which his brothers bowed to him when they came to purchase grain.

It has been suggested that the sheaf’s two-step process which Yosef beheld in his dream – its rising, and its then being firmly planted in its position – symbolizes an important aspect of Yosef’s experiences in Egypt. In his commentary to the beginning of Sefer Shemot (1:5), Rashi says about Yosef, “The same Yosef who shepherded his father’s sheep was the same Yosef who was in Egypt, became a ruler, and remained pious.” Rashi writes that Yosef was “*omeid be-tzidko*” – he “stood” in his stature of piety – an expression which perhaps hearkens back to Yosef’s dream of his sheaf, which stood in place (in Rashi’s formulation, “*la-amod al amdah*”). Yosef’s dream included the point that he was firmly stationed in place, that despite being violently uprooted from his family and his homeland, and being driven to a foreign land where he went from being a slave to being a prisoner to being second to the king, amid all these upheavals, he remained faithful to his values and principles. His vision foretold not merely his brothers’ subservience to him, but also his extraordinary consistency, his being “stationed in place,” remaining steadfastly loyal and devoted to his father’s teachings even amid all his travails and after becoming the ruler of a foreign nation.

Yosef’s dream, then, reminds us that religious commitment is not contingent upon any specific conditions or set of circumstances. We are to follow the example of Yosef’s sheaf of grain – to not only “rise” and elevate ourselves, but to “stand in place,” to ensure, as much as we can, that we are firmly implanted in our religious lifestyle, so that we retain our commitment and remain true to our Torah values despite whichever upheavals we experience over the course of our lives.

Sunday

Yesterday, we discussed the first of the two dreams which Yosef dreamt during his youth, foretelling his future leadership over his brothers (Bereishit 37:7). In this first dream, Yosef saw a vision of all the brothers binding sheaves in a field, when suddenly his brothers’ sheaves all bowed to his. We noted an oft-overlooked detail of that dream, namely, that Yosef’s sheaf first rose and stood in place before the other sheaves prostrated before it.

Another detail of this dream which should catch our attention is the fact that the other brothers’ sheaves are said to have “gathered around” (“*tesubena*”)before bowing to Yosef’s sheaf. Yosef told his brothers, “…and behold, your sheaves gathered round and bowed to my sheaf.” The sheaves did not bow in their original places, but rather approached Yosef’s sheaf and then bowed.

Netziv understands this aspect of the dream as foretelling the efforts which the brothers would make to find favor in Yosef’s eyes. When they came to Egypt to purchase grain, they did not just bow out of respect, but actively tried to earn his favor, as symbolized by the sheaves leaving their places and going to Yosef’s sheaf. (This theory is advanced by Malbim, as well.)

Netziv makes reference to his comments later, in Parashat Miketz (43:26), where he writes that this aspect of Yosef’s prophetic vision was fulfilled the second time his brothers came to Egypt. As the Torah there relates, when the brothers returned to Egypt with Binyamin, as Yosef had requested, they were brought to Yosef’s home, where they would later be hosted for a meal with the vizier. They had brought with them a gift from Canaan in order to earn Yosef’s favor, afraid that they might be accused of theft because the money with which they had purchased grain the first time had been mysteriously returned to their luggage. The Torah tells that when Yosef came to his home, the brothers presented him with the gift, and Netziv understands the Torah’s formulation as indicating that each brother frantically rushed over to Yosef to personally take part in the presentation. This frenzied, desperate attempt to earn Yosef’s favor, Netziv explains, fulfilled the vision of the sheaves gathering around Yosef’s bundle of grain in the field, which symbolized the brothers’ efforts to show him respect and honor so he would treat them well.

We might add that this aspect of the dream perhaps contributed to the brothers’ angry reaction to Yosef’s vision. They not only resented his aspirations to rule over them, but were also repulsed by the notion that they would one day need to desperately seek the favor of the brother whom they despised.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells the story of Yehuda and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. After the death of Yehuda’s oldest son, which left Tamar widowed, Yehuda had his second son, Onan, fulfill his levirate obligation and marry her. After Onan died without children, Yehuda feared having Tamar marry his third son. Tamar was now left widowed and childless, and later she boldly posed as a prostitute and stood on the road where Yehuda was traveling. With her face covered, Yehuda did not recognize her, and he solicited her services. She became pregnant, and was sentenced to capital punishment for having violated her legal bond with Yehuda’s third son. Just before her execution, Tamar sent a message to Yehuda with the collateral items which he had given her after their intimate union, informing him that the owner of those items was the one who impregnated her. Yehuda announced that he was the father, and she was not punished. As a number of commentators explain, the institution of *yibum* (levirate marriage) that was practiced before *Matan Torah* allowed for any family member to marry the childless widow, even her father-in-law, and thus Yehuda’s union with Tamar was legitimate.

The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (10b) makes a famous observation regarding this story, noting that Tamar risked her life by choosing not to identify Yehuda directly as the one responsible for her pregnancy. In order to spare Yehuda embarrassment, Tamar found a discreet manner to inform Yehuda that he made her pregnant, allowing him to decide whether or not to publicly come forward. On the basis of this story, the Gemara states that it is preferable for a person to “throw himself into a fiery furnace” than to humiliate another individual.

Leaving aside the well-known question as to whether this dictum is meant to be taken literally, it is worth noting the significance of the Gemara’s pointing specifically to Tamar as the model of sacrifice for the sake of avoiding causing another person shame. Tamar had a legitimate grievance against Yehuda, who, as it seems from the narrative, was to have had his next son marry Tamar. Yehuda, at least in Tamar’s mind, bore the responsibility to care for his childless, widowed daughter-in-law by having his third son marry her, but he failed to fulfill his duty. Tamar felt compelled to resort to this drastic measure because she was neglected by Yehuda, and she saw this as her only chance of conceiving and begetting a child. And yet, although she held Yehuda responsible for the situation that arose, nevertheless, she chose not to subject him to shame. Tamar courageously left it for Yehuda to decide whether or not to come forward at the expense of his honor in order to save her and the fetuses she was carrying.

The Gemara’s comment, then, teaches us not only about how far we must go to avoid causing people embarrassment, but also that a legitimate grievance does not entitle us to cause somebody embarrassment. Public humiliation is not an acceptable means of revenge against a person who has wronged us. Just as we are not allowed to cause somebody physical or financial harm in response to a grievance, we are likewise forbidden from shaming a person for revenge, no matter how valid we feel the grievance is.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells the disturbing story of *mekhirat Yosef*, how Yosef’s brothers plotted to kill him, eventually casting him into a pit from where he was later lifted and sold as a slave (either by the brothers or by passing merchants, depending on the different views among the commentators). This story begins with the brothers journeying to Shekhem to tend to the family’s herds: “His brothers went to shepherd their father’s sheep in Shekhem” (37:12). Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:13), observes that according to tradition, two dots appear on top of the word “*et*” in this verse in the Torah scroll. This unusual feature, the Midrash explains, serves as an allusion to an additional element that is not explicated in the text. Specifically, whereas the text informs us that the brothers went to tend to their father’s flocks, the dots allude to the fact that, in the Midrash’s words, they went “to tend to themselves.”

Different approaches have been taken to explain this enigmatic Midrashic passage. Some, including the *Taz* (*Divrei David Turei Zahav*) and Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apta (*Oheiv Yisrael*), explained that the Midrash seeks to draw our attention to the fact that this journey to Shekhem resulted in the brothers’ having a means of sustenance years later. Yaakov sent Yosef to observe his brothers in Shekhem, and when he arrived they threw him into a pit from which he was later lifted and brought to Egypt as a slave. He ended up rising to the position of vizier in Egypt after foreseeing the famine years, in preparation for which he oversaw the storage of gain, making Egypt the only country in the region with food when the famine struck. This resulted in the brothers and their families moving to Egypt so Yosef could support them, as they had no food in Canaan. Thus, this journey to tend to Yaakov’s flocks in Shekhem had the effect of ensuring that the brothers themselves were adequately tended to when a harsh famine struck the region. According to this interpretation, the Midrash seeks to demonstrate the mysterious hand of Providence, how God orchestrated the events such that a simple “business trip” had profound long-term consequences.

A different explanation is suggested by Rav Shlomo of Radomsk, in his *Tiferet Shelomo*. He writes that the Torah here alludes to the point of conflict between Yosef and brothers – namely, the issue of leadership and authority. Yosef received preferential treatment from Yaakov, reported to Yaakov about the brothers’ perceived misconduct, and dreamt dreams of authority over his brothers – all signaling his aspirations of superiority and leadership. The brothers outright rejected not only Yosef’s qualifications for leadership, but also the very assumption that such a position was necessary. They felt self-assured and confident with themselves, insistent that they did not need anybody – certainly not Yosef – telling them what to do. And thus when they traveled to Shekhem, away from Yosef, to tend to the family’s herds, their intention was not only to look after the animals, but also “to tend to themselves” – to distance and free themselves from Yosef and his dreams of authority. They left to Shekhem seeking independence and looking to spare themselves Yosef’s criticism. They wanted to assert their own path and direction, and to establish their freedom to make their own decisions and chart their own course without anybody instructing them how to live.

If so, then this comment of the Midrash highlights an aspect of the Yosef story which we might have otherwise overlooked – the brothers’ desire to assert their independence and their rejection of the need for any leadership, guidance and criticism. Their mistake culminated in their violent treatment of their brother, but it began with this desire to “tend to themselves,” to stubbornly resist criticism, advice, guidance and leadership. It was this exaggerated self-assurance which precipitated the feelings of resentment which eventually grew to feelings of outright hatred, and then to plans of fratricide.

This insight of the Rebbe of Radmosk teaches us the need for humility in the face of criticism and unsolicited advice. Too often, we dismiss criticism and advice without any rational consideration, out of our stubborn sense of self-assurance and our natural desire for independence and to feel independently competent and capable. The *Tiferet Shelomo* reminds us that although not all criticism directed towards us is legitimate, and many times it is off-base and inappropriate, we must be open to listen to other people’s observations and suggestions, rather than instinctively assume that we are always correct.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Vayeishev of Yosef’s travails after being brought as a slave to Egypt. He served for a high-ranking Egyptian official, Potifar, whose wife felt attracted to Yosef and unsuccessfully tried seducing him. After Yosef repeatedly resisted her advances, she falsely claimed that he had tried to assault her. Upon hearing his wife’s charges, Potifar sent Yosef to prison. The Torah writes, “Yosef’s master took him and placed him in the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were held, and he was there in the prison” (39:20).

As a number of commentators noted, the final clause of this verse – “he was there in the prison” – seems superfluous. Once we are told that Yosef was sent to prison, we quite obviously understand that “he was there in the prison.” Why did the Torah emphasize this point?

The Radak explains this phrase to mean that Potifar did not second-guess his decision to imprison Yosef. One might have assumed that given the level of trust that Yosef had earned while working for Potifar, as the Torah earlier describes (39:3-6), Potifar would not keep Yosef in prison. After imprisoning Yosef in response to his wife’s accusations, Potifar could have been expected to change his mind about Yosef and realize that the charges were false. The Torah therefore emphasizes that “Yosef was there in the prison” even after the passage of time, because Potifar accepted his wife’s fabricated allegations about Yosef.

In a somewhat similar vein, Netziv writes in his *Ha’amek Davar* commentary that the Torah emphasized the permanence of Yosef’s jail sentence. Later, we read of the butler and baker who were temporarily sent to the prison where Yosef was held, and kept there until their cases were decided. This shows that the prison was used not only for convicted criminals, but also for defendants awaiting trial. By emphasizing, “he was there in the prison,” the Torah clarifies that Yosef was sentenced to prison, and was not sent there temporarily while his case was being decided.

A chassidic reading of this phrase appears in Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev’s *Kedushat Levi*. Rav Levi Yitzchak reads in this verse an allusion to Yosef’s mental condition in response to this devastating turn of events, his attitude of acceptance and resignation. Often, when we find ourselves in an undesirable situation, we define our condition purely as a burden from which we seek freedom, and our entire attitude towards the situation is characterized by negativity and frustration. When Yosef was thrown into jail, Rav Levi Yitzchak writes, “he was there in the prison” – he resigned himself to the fact that this was his condition, and there was nothing he could do at the moment to change it. He was certainly not happy about the situation – and, as we read later, he endeavored to secure his freedom by asking the butler to petition on his behalf after being reinstated – but he resigned himself to the reality that this was his condition, and decided to make the most of the situation until it changed. Indeed, as the subsequent verses relate, Yosef assumed responsibility for his fellow inmates and became an assistant warden of sorts in the prison. Once he told himself that “he was there in the prison,” that this was, for whatever reason, where he was destined to remain for the next period in his life, he was able to make the most of his condition and achieve to the best of his ability under the most undesirable circumstances which he was now forced to endure.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Vayeishev the disturbing story of *mekhirat Yosef* – the mistreatment Yosef suffered at the hands of his brothers, which resulted in his being sold as a slave and brought to Egypt. The Torah relates that the brothers initially decided to kill Yosef, and then Reuven, the oldest brother, sought to rescue Yosef by convincing the others to throw him into a pit rather than kill him directly. His intention was to later lift Yosef from the pit and bring him home. However, after the brothers cast Yosef into the pit, they saw merchants in the distance, and realized that they could profit by selling Yosef as a slave to the merchants, rather than letting him die in the pit. Later, Reuven returned to the pit – presumably, to carry out his plan and rescue Yosef – and found that Yosef was gone.

It is clear from the Torah’s presentation of the sequence of events that Reuven was not present when Yosef was lifted from the pit and sold to the merchants. Although he was clearly with the other brothers during the early stages of this episode, for some reason, he was absent at the moment when Yosef was sold.

This anomaly provides strong support for the view of the Rashbam (37:28) that the brothers did not sell Yosef. The Rashbam explains that after casting Yosef into the pit, the brothers left and moved somewhere else to eat, and it was there that they saw the Yishmaelite merchants and conceived of the plan to sell Yosef. Seeing that his brothers were planning to lift Yosef from the pit and sell him as a slave, Reuven swiftly returned to the pit to save Yosef, and found that he was gone – as other merchants had in the interim lifted him from the pit and later sold him to the Yishmaelite merchants, who brought him to Egypt. According to the Rashbam’s interpretation of the text, we understand full well what the Torah means when it says that Reuven returned to the pit and found that Yosef had been lifted out. He returned to the pit to save Yosef before the other brothers had a chance to sell him, only to find that Yosef had already been lifted from there.

The conventional understanding, of course, is that it was Yosef’s brothers who lifted Yosef from the pit and sold him as a slave – thus giving rise to the question of why Reuven was not present when this took place.

Rashi (37:29) famously cites two explanations from the Midrash. The first is that as Yaakov’s sons tended to his flocks, they took turns caring for their father, as he was elderly and needed assistance. Reuven’s turn happened to fall just at that time, and thus while the brothers reached the decision to lift Yosef from the pit and sell him as a slave, Reuven was back at home with Yaakov. Rashi’s second interpretation is that Reuven was “occupied with his sackcloth and fast” repenting for his sin with Bilha, which the Torah briefly mentions earlier (35:22).

Both these approaches seem difficult from a practical standpoint. Yosef was sold as a slave in Dotan, near Shekhem (37:17), which is quite a distance from Chevron, where Yaakov resided at the time (37:14). It would have taken Reuven several days to return home to his father and then arrive back at the pit, and thus it is hardly conceivable that he went to Yaakov, tended to him, and then returned to the pit during the period when the other brothers decided to sell Yosef. As for the second Midrashic interpretation cited by Rashi, many later writers raised the question of why Reuven would be engaged in prayer and repentance at the time of *mekhirat Yosef* for his misdeed committed many years earlier.

Leaving aside these questions, we might suggest that *Chazal* here seek to depict a model of noble and well-intentioned activities performed at the wrong time. After successfully convincing the other brothers to cast Yosef into a pit instead of directly killing him, it would have been wholly irresponsible for Reuven to then leave his brothers in order to care for his father or to pray. Knowing how his brothers despised Yosef, to the point where they decided to murder him, Reuven should not have turned away from even a few brief moments if he was seriously committed to rescuing Yosef. *Chazal*’s depiction of Reuven leaving to care for his elderly father or to repent is likely not intended to praise Reuven for his devotion to his father or for the intensity of his repentance, but rather to criticize Reuven for his negligence. Even inherently admirable actions – such as caring for an ailing father and prayer – lose their value if they are done at the wrong time. During those critical moments, as Yosef was trapped in a pit with his hostile brothers nearby, Reuven was to have been singularly focused on the task of rescuing Yosef, and it was thus not legitimate for him to leave, even for the lofty purpose of caring for Yaakov or praying for forgiveness.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells of Yosef’s fateful trip to check on his brothers, as his father had requested. The brothers had gone to tend to the family’s herds in Shekhem, but when Yosef arrived in the area, he could not find them. He encountered a mysterious man who informed him that his brothers had “journeyed from here” (“*nas’u mi-zeh*”) and went to the nearby town of Dotan (37:17). Yosef proceeded to Dotan, where he indeed found his brothers who promptly conspired to kill him, ultimately deciding to throw him into a pit and then to sell him as a slave.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 84), commenting on the words “*nas’u mi-zeh*” used in reference to the brothers’ journey from Shekhem, explains this phrase to mean that the brothers journeyed “from the attributes of the Almighty.” The mysterious man who met Yosef (and whom *Chazal* famously identify as an angel) told him that the brothers not only moved in the geographic sense, traveling from Shekhem to Dotan, but also “journeyed” in terms of character, abandoning the qualities which God expects us to live by.

Where in the words “*nas’u mi-zeh*” did the Midrash find an allusion to the brothers’ abandonment of “Godly” qualities?

The *Matenot Kehuna* commentary suggests that the Midrash here refers to the verse in *Shirat Ha-yam* – the song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after the miracle of the sea – in which they proclaimed, “***Zeh*** *Keli ve-anveihu*” – “This is my God and I shall glorify Him” (Shemot 15:2). The Midrash associated the word “*zeh*” in the stranger’s response to Yosef (“*nas’u mi-****zeh***”) with *Benei Yisrael*’s jubilant declaration, “***Zeh*** *Keli ve-anveihu*.”

If, indeed, this is the Midrash’s intent, then we should perhaps probe deeper to understand the precise meaning of this association. What connection might there be between Yosef’s brothers’ abandonment of “the attributes of the Almighty” and the proclamation of “*Zeh Keli ve-anveihu*”?

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (133b) presents two explanations of the verse “*Zeh Keli ve-anveihu*.” First, it refers to the obligation of *hiddur mitzva* – aesthetically enhancing *mitzvot* by using beautiful *mitzva* objects. The word “*anveihu*” stems from the word *noi* – beauty, and thus refers to the aesthetic quality that we should endeavor to introduce into our *mitzva* observance. Additionally, the Gemara interprets the word “*anveihu*” to mean “emulate,” such that this verse refers to the obligation to emulate the Almighty’s qualities of kindness and compassion.

Taken together, these two interpretations of “*Zeh Keli ve-anveihu*” establish the broader notion that the service of God is supposed to be beautiful and pleasant. Jewish life is to be characterized by an aura of joy, positivity, goodwill, grace and beauty. It should be appealing and attractive, not gloomy and unpleasant. It should evoke feelings of inspiration and happiness, not of negativity and bitterness.

This, perhaps, is the point of connection noted by the Midrash between Yosef’s brothers and “*Zeh Keli ve-anveihu*.” The root cause of the brothers’ crime against Yosef was not jealousy per se. It is common for feelings of jealousy and contention to exist in a family setting, and this is true even among families of righteous people. The root cause of this tragic story was the absence of “*Zeh Keli ve-anveihu*,” of a commitment to the beauty of Jewish life. If the brothers were truly committed to this ideal, they would have handled the situation differently. They were legitimately offended by the preferential treatment Yosef received from his father, they legitimately resented his reporting their alleged wrongdoing, and they were legitimately concerned about his dreams of leadership. But if we live in the manner indicated by “*Zeh Keli ve-anveihu*,” in a manner of pleasantness and positivity, then we can handle these kinds of tensions with dignity and grace, without losing our composure and resorting to anger and hostility. If we strive to emulate “the attributes of the Almighty,” the attributes of compassion and kindness, and to live lives of “*hiddur*,” of beauty and joy, then we will remain upbeat, composed and poised even as we deal with feelings such an envy, resentment and anxiety. *Chazal* here remind us of the beautiful and serene lifestyle that we must strive to follow, a “Godly” quality which must express itself, among other ways, in our reactions to the difficult and tense situations that invariably arise over the course of daily life.

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