

MIKEITZ

BROTHERHOOD

The way we treat people in life makes a difference. The thoughts and motives behind our actions can have everlasting consequences for us as individuals and for the nation at large. In *parashas Mikeitz*, we look in on Yosef and his brothers in the aftermath of one of the most significant actions done between people in our history: the selling of Yosef as a slave and sending him down to Egypt. It is this action and its correction that set a precedent for all eternity of how we need to act and feel towards our fellow man.

Years after his sale, Yosef is raised to a high stature. Brought out of prison to interpret Pharaoh's dream, he is catapulted into a place of power and prestige as he is appointed Egypt's *mishneh lamelech* (viceroys). A few years later, the brothers' lives fill with hardship. They and their entire land are faced with famine – forcing them to go down to Egypt in search of food.

When the paths of Yosef and his brothers cross in our *parashah*, Yosef is in a position of influence and standing, while the brothers are in the unenviable position of having to ask for their basic needs from a foreign ruler – Yosef. Initially, though, only Yosef is aware of the reunion. While he recognizes his brothers immediately, they do not recognize him and continue to feel vulnerable in front of this man they consider a stranger.

At this time, Yosef could have assured them that their request for life-sustaining rations does not rest in the hands of an outsider, but with their own brother. But he does not. In fact, this is when the brothers' troubles really begin.

First, Yosef accuses them of being spies; he places them in prison for three days; then, he forces them to fetch their youngest brother Binyamin and bring him down to Egypt, whereupon Binyamin is accused of theft and threatened with slavery. For Yaakov *Avinu's* sons, it is one problem after another in this *parashah* – problems that do not resolve themselves until the next *parashah*. Only in *Vayigash* does Yosef finally reveal himself with his famous words: “*Ani Yosef. Ha’od avi chai?* (I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?)”¹

There are two central questions on this *parashah*. Firstly, when Yosef sees his brothers, he knows who they are. Why does he not immediately give them a *shalom aleichem*? And remember, Yaakov *Avinu*, his father, has been sitting *shivah* and mourning his loss for twenty-two years! You would think that as soon as Yosef sees his brothers, he would break down and say, “It’s me. Let’s send our father a postcard to say that I’m alive and well.” On the contrary, he acts with harshness towards them, concealing his identity and accusing them of serious crimes.

Why does Yosef do this? Why does he think it is necessary to put the brothers through all the difficulties of *parashas Mikeitz*? And what about his father? Why did Yosef not rush to relieve his father’s suffering?

The second question concerns the time period in which *Mikeitz* is read. This *parashah* generally falls out on a *Shabbos* during or very close to *Chanukah*. What is the significance of this timing? What does Yosef’s harshness toward the brothers have to do with our celebration of *Chanukah*?

¹ *Bereishis* 45:3.

More Than a Dream

First, as to the question about Yosef's treatment of his brothers, we begin with the approach most often cited, brought by the Ramban.²

Yosef knew that the dreams he had dreamed in the previous *parashah*, *Vayeishev*, were prophecy. He also understood that both prophetic visions – where sheaves of wheat, and then the sun, the moon and eleven stars bow down to him – had to be realized, and that he was obligated to do everything in his power to make that happen. When Yosef saw his brothers again in Egypt, only ten of his brothers had come and bowed down to him, but the first dream called for all the brothers to do so. Yosef therefore knew that he had to cause Binyamin to come and bow, and only then could he call for his father Yaakov *Avinu*, to have the second dream fulfilled. Were it not for his responsibility to realize the dreams, Yosef would never have let Yaakov *Avinu* suffer.

However, even if Yosef believed that his dreams had to come true, did he have to go about realizing them in such a seemingly callous way? Where was the compassion we would expect him to show toward members of his own family?

To answer this question, we must back up and examine the original behavior of the brothers in deciding to kill – and subsequently plan to sell – Yosef. Rabbi Moshe Shapiro quotes³ the question of the *Shelah HaKadosh* as to the incongruity of the brothers' action. The level of the *Shevatim* (tribes) was so high that it to some extent surpassed the level of angels. How was it possible for such people to have no pity on their own brother? Where was

² Commentary on *Bereishis* 42:9.

³ *MiMa'amakim*, essay 32, p. 227.

their compassion? The question is compounded by Yosef's status as a supremely righteous individual. Even the biggest criminal would give pause at killing a *tzaddik*. How, then, could these holy brothers have even considered killing Yosef?

The *Shlah HaKadosh* reveals a hidden depth to the brothers' motivations according to the *midrash*⁴ from the beginning of *parashas Vayeishev* on the words "*Eileh toldos Yaakov Yosef...* (these are the descendants of Yaakov: Yosef...)"⁵ "*Kol mah she'eira lazeh, eira lazeh* (everything that happened to this one [Yaakov *Avinu*], happened to that one [Yosef])." Examples brought by the *midrash* include their status as *bechor* (having the rights of a firstborn), the hatred of their brothers and the attempt of their brothers to kill them. The root of the conflict between Yosef and his brothers, says the *Shelah HaKadosh*, was that the Tribes assumed that the true *bechor* when it came to *malchus* (kingship) in their family was Yehudah. Reuven, through error, had lost this desirable position, and Yehudah received this privilege in his place.

Even as Yehudah was considered the *bechor* when it came to the privilege of *malchus*, Yosef, Rachel's *bechor*, was also destined for *malchus*. His *malchus* was supposed to pave the way for Yehudah's, to unify the Jewish people in order that they be able to accept the *Malchus Beis Yehudah* (kingship of the house of Yehudah) as one entity. But the brothers failed to understand that the kingship of Yosef was the planned precursor for the kingship of Yehudah, and instead suspected and judged him as a usurper of the throne. A person who defies *Malchus Beis Yehudah* is considered as if he has defied the *Shechinah* of God Himself, and therefore deserves the death penalty.

⁴ *Bereishis Rabba* 84:6.

⁵ *Bereishis* 37:2.

Although Yosef tried to share his understanding of his role with the brothers by telling them the dreams, the brothers, as a result of their lack of understanding of the place of a preliminary *malchus*, believed that Yosef was trying to grab all the power and privilege of leadership for himself. The *Shelah HaKadosh* thus explains that this conflict between the brothers was well beyond the petty disputes that usually go on in families. They were arguing over the Divinely-ordained destiny of the Jewish people.

If the brothers were acting *leshem Shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven), why did they – and the Jewish people until this day – suffer as a result of their actions? Rabbi Moshe Shapiro explains that despite the fact that the brothers' primary, conscious motivation was a desire to see justice done and the Divine plan for *Klal Yisrael* carried out, they did harbor a small measure of *kinah* (jealousy) towards Yosef for his elevated traits and status. Had it not been for the *kinah*, they would have been able to see the truth in Yosef's understanding of his role.

Their failure to understand was not merely an intellectual failure, for which they would not be held accountable, but a failure caused subconsciously by the existence of this unwarranted jealousy, and because of this they were held culpable for their actions.

If we understand that the corrosive force of even this hint of jealousy was at the center of the conflict between Yosef and his brothers, we have the key to decoding *parashas Mikeitz*. Yosef was not merely trying to get them to bow down to him so that his dreams would be fulfilled; he was trying to inspire the brothers to do *teshuvah*: to recognize that what they did to him was wrong, that their actions were based on jealousy, and that they had made a mistake by refusing to acknowledge the vital role that he would play in the future *malchus* of the Jewish people.

A Fix for Jealousy

After a brief initial conversation with his brothers, the first thing that Yosef does is to have them placed under arrest for three days. Then, on the third day, he says to them, “Do this and you shall live. I fear God. If you are truthful people, one of your brothers will be imprisoned in your place of confinement, and you go bring food for the hunger of your households. And your youngest brother bring to me; your words will be verified and you will not die.”⁶

How was this experience supposed to move the brothers to appropriate repentance? Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik offers⁷ an answer via a powerful insight into the concept of *teshuvah*. One of the central precepts of *teshuvah* is that no sinner can be absolved without first paying a debt to God: repaying, God, so to speak, by suffering enough to correspond with the exact measure of joy derived from the sin. This approach, called *teshuvas hamishkal*, was subscribed to by the *Ba'al HaRokeach* and many of the *Chassidei Ashkenaz*. This is the type of *teshuvah* made famous by stories of people rolling in the snow and doing other painful things to themselves in order to achieve atonement for their sins.

Clearly, this approach to *teshuvah* could lead to a life of tremendous suffering, because, after all, we do spend much of our life sinning. Adhering to this method, life could become one long, unpleasant ordeal of penance. But most *Rishonim* (early Rabbinic authorities), as well as the *Ba'al Shem Tov* and the Vilna Gaon, do not advocate *teshuvas hamishkal*. They do not disagree with the concept that the sinner needs to pay God back for the pleasure he derived from the sin, but rather with its application.

⁶ *Bereishis* 42:18-20.

⁷ *Nora's HaRaw – Chanukah*, edited by Rabbi David Schreiber, p. 8.

Teshuvah is associated with the *Shem Havayah* or *Yud-Kei-Vav-Kei*, the name of Hashem which expresses His attribute of mercy. In fact, when discussing the sacrifices related to *teshuvah*, the Torah only uses the *Shem Havayah*, and not the name *Elokim*. *Elokim* is the name that expresses the Divine attribute of strict justice, and according to strict justice, a sinner would be required to pay God back in full for any sin committed. It would be impossible to bring an animal sacrifice and have its death substitute for the justice-ordained death of the sinner – but this type of partial, substitute payment is possible in the realm of mercy, represented by the *Shem Havayah*.

Avraham *Avinu's* sacrifice at the *Akeidah* represents this type of *teshuvah*. The Torah tells us that when Avraham *Avinu* put the ram on the altar, he brought it as a sacrifice “*tachas beno* (in place of his son).”⁸ This sacrifice exemplified the “*teshuvah* of substitution” upon which the atonement of future sacrifices would be predicated. In the times of the *Beis HaMikdash*, a person who wanted to atone for his sin would bring a *korban chatas* (sin-offering) to the *Cohen* and watch it being burnt on the altar. This experience was meant to inspire in him the recognition that it should rightly be himself currently being slaughtered and burnt, but God, in His mercy, accepts partial, vicarious suffering.

This is exactly what Yosef wanted from his brothers, Rabbi Soloveitchik explains: *teshuvah* of substitution. Yosef knew that for what the brothers did – kidnapping him and selling him into slavery – the penalty was death. Yet Yosef used the concept of *teshuvah* “*tachas beno*” to achieve his brothers’ atonement, by having an arrest and imprisonment of three days substitute for their sin of selling Yosef into imprisonment for over twenty years.

⁸ *Bereishis* 22:13.

When Yosef told his brothers, “Do this and you shall live,”⁹ he was essentially hinting to them of their option to take advantage of the *teshuvah* of substitution: “View what you are going through as an act of atonement for your sin, and you will merit atonement.”

When Yosef inflicted this substitute punishment on them and put his brothers in jail, they admitted their guilt for the first time. After the sale of Yosef, the brothers did not feel remorse; they sat down and ate; they had a party. They also did not admit guilt any time after that – until they were thrown into jail in Egypt, and then Yosef announced that they were to go home without one of the brothers. Only then did they say, “But we are guilty about our brother, that we saw the distress of his soul in his pleading to us and we did not listen. Therefore, this distress has come upon us.”¹⁰

Getting thrown into jail, the brothers realized, was clearly not an accident, but a sign from God. Even though their actions against Yosef and this consequence happened so many years apart, they made the connection and understood that they were guilty because of the callous way in which they had treated their brother, and that this was their opportunity for *teshuvah* and atonement.

Rabbi Mordechai Miller adds¹¹ that every aspect of Yosef’s affliction of his brothers was carefully thought out in order to remind them of aspects of their sinful behavior towards him. He accused them of spying – to remind them of the slander they had said about him. He threw them into jail – to remind them of how they had thrown him into the pit. He put them in a position where Yehudah had to fight for Binyamin’s release with the argument that

⁹ *Bereishis* 42:18.

¹⁰ *Bereishis* 42:21.

¹¹ *Sabbath Shiurim*, p. 63.

it would cause their elderly father suffering – to remind them of how they had caused Yaakov *Avinu* untold suffering through Yosef's sale and disappearance.

Yosef set up his brothers to experience what they put him through, on a much smaller scale, in order to motivate their *teshuvah*. While previously the brothers had felt completely justified for selling Yosef, they now realized that maybe there was a motivation behind selling Yosef that was not completely honorable and that they needed to repent for that.

Divine Calculations

When *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* presents us with difficulties meant to inspire us to change our ways, He sees to it that our circumstances are, by and large, a direct correlation of that which we have done wrong. Whatever difficulty we experience is measured out by Hashem so precisely that we are getting exactly what we deserve, and not an iota more.

Rabbi Matisyahu Salomon finds¹² a powerful demonstration of this reality in a statement of the *midrash* that the caravan that transported Yosef down to Egypt was carrying fragrant spices. This was atypical for caravans of the day; usually, they carried foulsmelling merchandise, but because of Yosef's righteousness, God intervened. Rabbi Salomon points out the incredible precision of God's actions. When God has a person suffer, it is only to the precise extent that he needs to.

While there was a Divine decree that Yosef had to suffer on some level, and therefore he was taken forcibly from his home,

¹² *Matnas Chaim: Ma'amarim*, p. 67.

betrayed by his brothers and separated from his beloved father, this did not include enduring putrid odors all the way to Egypt, and so God sent an atypical caravan so as to obviate that potential suffering. It would have been just over God's precise calculation, and so it was eliminated. In our own lives, it is easy to forget how careful God is to give us in punishment only what we are due, and not a drop more.

The brothers were fully aware of this reality, and so they assumed that any difficulty they encountered was deserved. All along their journey, when they found themselves framed for stealing money from the royal treasury, for example, they immediately thought that it was because they sold Yosef. At every step, they recognized that they were being punished.

This realization is the cause of the abrupt change in Yehudah's behavior between the end of *Mikeitz* and the beginning of *Vayigash*.

When the royal goblet is found stashed in Binyamin's sack and Yosef accuses him of theft, Yehudah cries out with great remorse: "What can we say to my master? How can we speak, and how can we justify ourselves? God has found the sin of your servants."¹³ The Rabbis point out that the phrase "God has found the sin of your servants" clearly refers to the sin of selling Yosef. The brothers admit that this sin is the source of all their troubles, and they accept upon themselves the Divine decree of suffering: "We are slaves to my master, we and also the one that the goblet was found in his hand."¹⁴

Vayigash, however, begins, "*Vayigash eilav Yehudah* (Yehudah approached him)."¹⁵ The Rabbis explain this to mean that Yehudah

¹³ *Bereishis* 44:16.

¹⁴ *Bereishis* 44:16.

¹⁵ *Bereishis* 44:18.

approached Yosef and spoke to him very harshly, to the extent that Yehudah was ready to go to war against Yosef. It seems inconsistent that at the end of *parashas Mikeitz*, Yehudah is behaving subserviently to Yosef, and at the beginning of *parashas Vayigash* he is stepping forward, ready to wage war.

Rabbi Salomon explains¹⁶ that when the brothers said that they were ready to be slaves, it was because they accepted this slavery as a Divine decree in retribution for their sale of Yosef. However, when Yosef refused Yehudah's offer, declaring that the rest of the brothers could go free as long as Binyamin stayed enslaved, Yehudah understood that this could not be a measure-for-measure punishment. Binyamin should have no part in such a drama, as he did not participate in the sale of Yosef. Instead, Yosef should enslave the other ten brothers – those responsible for the act.

Thus, as soon as Yosef told the ten that they could leave, Yehudah reasoned that this was not a case of Divine punishment that required acceptance and submission, but a Divine *nisayon* (test) to enable the brothers to correct the sin at its root cause. God was testing how Yehudah would respond to an act of injustice against a son of Rachel. At that point, Yehudah stepped forward assertively and spoke up for Binyamin, protecting a son of Rachel and correcting their past sin against another son of hers.

As soon as Yehudah spoke up and showed sincere love for Binyamin, Yosef knew that they had achieved full *teshuvah* and corrected the root of their sin: they had put their lives on the line for a son of Rachel. The test was over. And therefore Yosef revealed himself immediately: "I am Yosef."¹⁷

¹⁶ *Matnas Chaim: Ma'amarim*, p. 77.

¹⁷ *Bereishis* 45:3.

Historical Foreshadowing

What Yosef achieves with his brothers is played out on a larger scale throughout Jewish history. Yosef's *malchus* is supposed to be the first stage in the establishment of the Yehudah's *malchus*; it is supposed to unite us as a people before we can be redeemed.

We see the beginning of this sequence when Shaul, a descendant of Rachel and therefore a part of the larger *Beis Yosef*, is crowned king before David, a descendant of Yehudah. Rabbi Salomon points out¹⁸ that David and Shaul's son, Yonasan, were intimate friends. Although each hailed from a separate royal line, they had great love for one another. Had Yonasan been king, they could have formed the perfect union of *Malchus Beis Yosef* and *Malchus Beis Yehudah*.

But that was not to be. In a famous scene that we read about in the *haftarah* on a Shabbos that coincides with *erev rosh chodesh*, Yonasan arranges with David to send him a sign through shooting arrows. Arrows are a symbol of *lashon hara*, of hatred. In addition to the message of the sign being Yonasan telling David that he must flee, the very arrows themselves hinted to the fact that the time had not yet come where they could live and work together in peace.

In *parashas Mikeitz*, which forms the basis for the eventual ideal relationship between the two kingships, this was the first thing that had to be accomplished. The brothers needed to realize that Yosef and Yehudah are not separate entities, but co-dependent. The purpose of Yosef's harsh treatment of his brothers was far beyond the mere fulfillment of his dreams. The brothers had to be motivated to do *teshuvah*, to see that the theory behind their actions was unfounded and to actively correct that ideological flaw. Only once they came to the realization that the sons of Rachel would also play a vital role in the family mission, could Yosef reveal himself.

¹⁸ *Matnas Chaim: Ma'amarim*, p. 232.

Sibling Rivalry

It is one thing to feel remorse for wronging another person, to realize intellectually that one was in error; it is another and far more difficult thing to develop true love and friendship towards a person whom one intentionally desired to wrong. This was the second thing that had to be accomplished by the brothers.

Rabbi Soloveitchik explains¹⁹ that the real sin of the *Shevatim* was their failure to appreciate the blessing and the importance of brotherhood. Had they realized how critical peaceful unity was for the development of *Klal Yisrael*, had they promoted that unity within the midst of their immediate family, the history of the Jewish people would have looked different. The rivalry, strife and division among the Jewish people throughout the centuries are ramifications of the rivalry between the brothers, which culminated in the event of selling Yosef.

At the root of that single event bearing destructive and far-reaching consequences, we find a simple lack of sensitivity, a lack of appreciation for the blessings of brotherhood. The brothers' sin was not only a failure to acknowledge *Malchus Beis Yosef*, the historical role meant to be played by the children of Rachel. It was their failure to treat a brother in a brotherly fashion.

All the trials Yosef's brothers had to go through in *Mikeitz* were meant to bring out in them the awareness of brotherhood. This feeling is achieved by all the brothers when they say to one another, "We are guilty about our **brother**."²⁰ This is real *teshuvah!*

It is not only that they accepted responsibility for their actions, but that they acknowledged their relationship to Yosef, and all that implied. When the emerging Jewish nation was able to acknowledge

¹⁹ *Nora'os HaRav – Chanukah*, p. 9.

²⁰ *Bereishis* 42:21.

the importance of brothers living together in peace, Yosef was able to reveal himself, and they could reunite.

The *Chanukah* Connection

We can now explore the relationship between *Chanukah* and the story of *Mikeitz*. *Teshuvah* and brotherhood are the major themes of both the *parashah* and the holiday.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik reminds us²¹ that the victory of the *Chashmonaim* over the Greeks was not just a physical victory; it was an ideological victory. And not just a victory against outsiders, but one within the Jewish people. Prior to *Chanukah*, many Jews had assimilated, adopting Hellenist ideals and practices. The essence of the miracle of *Chanukah* was the return of hundreds of thousands of Jews to a recognition of their relationship with God and with Torah. The message of *Chanukah* is the message of *teshuvah*.

Thousands of years later, each individual can tap into an increased power to recognize the spiritual on *Chanukah*. Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf writes²² that the small flickering flames of the candles represent the small calls of our soul, which often go unheard amid the stresses and obligations of everyday life. *Chanukah* is the time when we have a greater capacity to slow down and become more attuned to the existence and reality of our soul and its needs.

Rabbi Apisdorf's ideas underscore those of the *Sefas Emes* who writes²³ that we light the candles to ignite our souls. We light the

²¹ Nora'os Harav – *Chanukah*, p. 19.

²² *Chanukah: Eight Nights of Light, Eight Gifts for the Soul*, p. 95.

²³ *Chanukah*, p. 103.

candles specifically at the doorway to the house because a house represents one's soul, one's inner essence, and its doorway represents control of the access to one's thoughts. It is the crossover point where thought leaves the realm of the theoretical and is translated into actions.

The *Chanukah* lights have the ability to inspire that aspect of us that decides how we think and act. *Chanukah* is about meditating on the candles, about changing ourselves at our root, at the *pesach habayis* (doorway), so that everything that comes out into the *reshus harabbim* (public domain) will be channeled in the correct direction – that of coming closer to God.

Chanukah is also a time very much focused on the family and the unity within the family. Rabbi Apisdorf notes²⁴ that the main players in the story of *Chanukah* are not highlighted as individuals, but as family groups (the *Chashmonaim*, Chana and her seven sons). The obligation of the *Chanukah* candles is an obligation on the home more than on the individual (*ner ish uveiso* – a candle for a man and his home), and the candles should be lit with the entire family in attendance. This focus closely parallels the message of our *parashah*: that of *achdus* (unity) and brotherhood within the family unit.

Chanukah is not only the time to come together with our nuclear families; it is also a time to join together with the larger family that is the Jewish people. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach points out²⁵ that the heroes of the *Chanukah* story are none other than the *Chashmonaim* – the descendants of Aharon HaCohen, the model of a facilitator of peace among members of the Jewish People. On *Chanukah*, we are meant to concentrate not only on the light

²⁴ *Chanukah: Eight Nights of Light, Eight Gifts for the Soul*, p. 36.

²⁵ *Lema'an Achai Verei'ai*, p. 80.

burning within ourselves, but to see all Jews as *Chanukah* lights: as beautiful candles, as Divine souls. This focus has the potential to bring about great peace and unity in *Klal Yisrael*. *Chanukah* is a time of love; it is a time of national brotherhood.

The way we act towards one another makes an impact, and so do our motivations. Our intentions need to be pure, not stemming from hidden (or not so hidden) feelings of jealousy. Jealousy is not necessary, because in our Jewish nation there is room for more than one '*bechor*'. Everyone has his own unique role, just as *Malchus Beis Yebudah* and *Malchus Beis Yosef* do. If we did mistreat one another, we need to acknowledge that we were wrong for hurting our fellow man, and the ultimate *teshuvah* is not only feeling remorse, but having a sense of *achdus*, love and belonging. This is the goal for the Jewish nation.

This goal was realized on *Chanukah* when not only did the Jewish people repent their wrongdoings, but they also joined together as one to fight for Hashem. Every year at this time the power of *Mikeitz* and *Chanukah* returns. We stand together in *achdus* around the *menorah* with our families and allow the candles to penetrate our souls and influence our actions.

Just as Yosef was only able to reveal himself when the brothers took responsibility for their actions and felt a sense of belonging to one another, so too in our days *Mashiach ben Yosef* will only be able to reveal himself when we treat our fellow Jews as brothers. This revelation will lead to the ultimate revelation of *Mashiach ben David* and a time when we will live together in peace and brotherhood.