*Yasher Koach*

It’s Nice to Be Acknowledged

by

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The list of those who believe the adage that “any publicity is better than no publicity” is a long one. Yet there are many who look askance at the public acknowledgement others receive – whether for good deeds or bad, as if publicity itself detracts from our actions. Perhaps it is unwise – and a bit disingenuous – to be so quick to judge. After all, who wouldn’t want to see their name in lights, even for a few minutes?

Imagine now if the name in lights is eternalized in Torah!

When Yosef’s brothers clamor to murder him it is Reuven who speaks up in opposition to their wicked plan. From our lofty position, knowing the profound consequences of his actions, Reuven’s action can appear pre-ordained and cast in a way that would suggest that God’s bidding requires no greater acknowledgement in our lives. But even from our modern day perspective, we could certainly wonder, why would Reuven even bother? As the eldest brother, certainly Yosef’s dreams and arrogant words were most cutting and hurtful to him.

Abarbanel suggests that Reuven opposed his brothers’ plan because he believed that Yosef’s dreams might very well have been true. And, as he went on to argue to his brothers, “If the dreams are true, why are you willing to subvert the will of Hashem? You will certainly not succeed.”

Believing the dreams might be true, Reuven tells them, “Lo nakeinu nefesh - we will not strike him mortally.” But when the brothers ignore him and hold to their original plan, Reuven further implores them not to shed blood - al tishpechu dam.

“Don’t kill him with your own hands. Throw him into the pit.”

Employing this strategy, Reuven made the convincing case that if Yosef’s dreams were indeed true, then God would surely *somehow* save him. And, if they not true, then the brothers’ intention would be realized and Yosef would certainly die in the pit, surrounded by snakes and scorpions.

Recognizing Reuven’s logic, the brothers did as their oldest brother suggested and threw Yosef into the pit.  Yosef’s ultimate salvation is a direct result of Reuven’s impassioned intervention. “Reuven heard, and he rescued him from their hand; he said, We will not strike him mortally.” (37:21)

Is Abarbanel right in his reading of Reuven’s motivation? What if Reuven had made his case to his brothers in order to gain credit and fame for his actions? What would that say about the power – and correctness – of such recognition as a catalyst for moral behavior? Would he not have done as much if his actions would have been reported on the evening news? *L’havdil*.How much more would he have done it if he had known that his action would live eternally in the words of Torah, that he would be credited with a deed that would ultimately lead to our redemption from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai?

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 34:9) suggests that *had* Reuven known that the Torah was going to record that “Reuven heard, and he rescued him from their hand” (vayishma Reuven va’yatzileiu miyadam) he would have personally carried Yosef back to their father on his shoulders.”

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How much more good would we all do if we had the benefit of knowing how our actions would be recorded!

Who among us could deny how a warm “pat on the back” or a hearty *yasher koach* makes us feel? Or how such acknowledgement helps us to continue our good work – even if the task is difficult. It is a deep and real human desire to be recognized for the things we do. Indeed, it is human to want to be acknowledged even for the things we *hope* to do. Ultimately, isn’t that the lesson of Rabbi Tarfun’s teaching, “It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it.”

None of us can ever truly “complete the task”. All we can do is add our good works to it. Even that effort deserves recognition. Acknowledgement is warranted even for the goodness of our intentions and positive thought! For who knows when the spark of a positive thought or good intention is enough to bend the curve of history?

After all when Reuven suggests that Joseph not be killed but rather thrown into the pit, the Torah tells us that they “cast him into the pit; the pit was empty, no water was in it.” (37:23) This is an odd phrasing indeed. Because there was no water in it, it was empty? Not according to Rashi who, citing the Talmud teaches, “but there were serpents and scorpions in it.”

Serpents and scorpions could easily have resulted in Joseph’s death. So then, how would throwing him into this pit avert the brothers killing him? It is here that the Torah seems to fully recognize and highlight Reuven’s role in this powerful drama. “Reuven heard, *and he rescued* him from their hand.”

These words would have been the banner headline in the New York *Times* the next day! This is the lead story! Reuven *heard* and he *rescued* him… What a heroic deed!

To those who suggest that public recognition of good deeds is somehow “poor taste” I would ask, Does the Torah acknowledge this deed with barely a nod? No! The Torah proclaims it in the equivalent of bright neon lights. Why? Because by doing so we learn that all of our good deeds, intentions and accomplishments deserve to be lit up brighter than the Las Vegas skyline!

The Torah is making clear that there is value in getting involved; in extending ourselves on behalf of others.

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Halachic sources draw powerful lessons from this seemingly unnecessary phrase, “Reuven heard, and he rescued him from their hand.”

The Midrash suggests that, had Reuven had any idea of the recognition – the *headline* ­– he would receive for this simple act, he would have carried Yosef back to their father on his shoulders.

*Just for the headline*.

It is no different for us. We want and need recognition and we respond to the need in order to get it! When appeals are made in shuls most people want their names announced and their generosity recognized. Such public recognition is a great motivator. The recognition is enough to make us want to *give more*.

When we debate whether public recognition should be accorded to a generous donor, to the one who performs a great deed in the community, we would be wise to consider what we learn in the very next *posuk*. “…And Reuven said to them, Shed no blood! Throw him into the pit in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him – *l’maan hatzil oso*.” What is the point of saying *l’maan hatzil oso*,“intending to rescue him”?

His intention is to rescue him from their hand and to return him to their father. We know that Reuven gave them the suggestion not to kill, but rather to throw him into the pit. If his intent was that Joseph not be killed then throwing him into the pit could only be in order to rescue him. So why add, *l’maan atzil oso*?   The great medieval halachic authority and  Talmudic commentator authority, the Rashba, teaches that from here we derive that “it is commendable /appropriate  to write and publicize the one who does a mitzvah, for the Torah publicized Reuven’s intention to rescue Yosef and return him to his father.”

What a lesson! The Torah adds words to teach us an important life lesson! The Rashba continues, “…and if the Torah did so, so must we walk in its paths of peace and pleasantness.”

The lesson is clear. Spare no words in lauding those who do good, who give of themselves for the well-being of others as well as the community. It is from here that the Rema codifies in Shulchan Aruch that when one contributes something to tzedakah (an *aron kodesh*, a *paroches* for example) it is permissible to inscribe his name on it, and members of the community may not protest.

A good deed deserves acknowledgement. And not only the one who does the good deed but also he whose good intentions will undoubtedly lead to good deeds.

This is the lesson of the Torah Temimah in noting that, while it was Shlomo who actually built the Beit HaMikdash, Shlomo’s great deed could only have been accomplished because David had given his heart and soul towards that goal. David could not build it. Nevertheless, God refers to the Temple as having been built by David. “*Mizmor shir chanukas ha’bayis l’Dovid*.”

Were we to properly recognize all who invest time, efforts, heart and soul to achieve and accomplish – but have not as yet been able to – they too might one day “personally carry Yosef back to their father.”

If only they knew how we honored their intent, many a Yosef who is struggling would be saved.

Rav Aaron Kotler explains the Midrash as meaning that even though the great men of yesteryear including Reuven fully understood the value and merit of every mitzvah and righteous deed, it was beyond their comprehension that an eternal Torah would record their actions, and that this Torah would serve as our guide forever.  Had they realized the absolute value and consequence of their choices and actions, they would have been ever so much more meticulous with every facet of their actions.

Reuven was right to argue with his brothers. But imagine what he would have said and done if hehad known that the narrative was to be recorded in the eternal Torah – how much more would he have done!

Reuven believed he was saving his brother. But he was not merely saving Yosef – as worthy of merit as that was – he was saving the world. Through Yosef the entire world was saved during the years of famine, not just Yaakov’s household. Ultimately, Yosef’s descendants overpowered Eisav’s descendants, as Ovadiah prophesized, “The house of Yaakov will be fire, the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Eisav for straw, and they will ignite them and devour them!”

All because Reuven saved Yosef. *Yasher koach!*