

Vayigash: Blinded by the Lights

Moshe Taragin

How could they? How could such moral people, who founded an ethical lifestyle of kindness and compassion, act so cruelly toward one another. Perhaps the behavior of the brothers toward Yosef could be chalked up to momentary weakness. Every human being has fleeting indiscretions and these otherwise ethical people, let their jealousy and insecurity get the better of themselves. After selling their brother into slavery, one thing led to another, and they found themselves covering up their murder with a brazen lie.

Yosef's conduct, however, is more incomprehensible. His manipulation of his brothers is deliberate and relentless, as he methodically ensnares them in a ruse to coerce them to bow before. All this maneuvering just to realize his dreams. He incarcerates Shimon on trumped up charges of espionage and subsequently entraps Binyamin, traumatizing the rest of the brothers who desperately surrender themselves as ransom.

In the Torah's description, Yosef's admission to his brothers is attributed to his inability to maintain his composure, implying that he fully intended to escalate the situation and instill greater terror, but was emotionally unable to carry through. Had his knees not gone weak he would have continued his scheme.

How could Yosef act so callously? What possible influence can overpower even righteous people, allowing them to behave in this fashion? The answer, in part, is that Yosef fell victim to one of the most treacherous character traits, a trait we call ambition.

Aiming High

God endowed us with ambition, empowering us to believe in our own talents, to dream of grand accomplishments and to work tirelessly toward seemingly unattainable lofty goals. By implanting us with ambition, God raised the bar of human capabilities.

He also raised the bar of religious excellence as ambition inspires us to transcend our humanity and break through life's restraints to better encounter Him. Ambition convinces us that we are capable of surpassing religious experiences such as mastering the infinite word of God or of

partnering with Him in the redemption of human history. Without ambition self-doubt would cripple us and these achievements would be impossible. Ambition is a catapult, both for human achievement and for religious excellence.

The Dark Side

However, there is dark side to ambition, and to our desire for honor and our lust for power. Firstly, ambition often draws our attention inward to ourselves, our accomplishments, and our ego, thereby drawing us apart from God. The Tower of Babel is a cautionary tale of what occurs when ambition inspires a project which isn't built on a platform of religious sentiment. Through ambition we exalt ourselves even against God.

To his credit, Yosef avoided this first pitfall of ambition, preserving awareness of God, even after achieving glory and title. He constantly mentions God's name, even after he is appointed to royalty. It is one thing to cite God while an indentured servant or while rotting in a prison cell. It is quite another to attribute his meteoric success as a dream teller to God, or to name his two children, now princes, in appreciation of God extending care for him in Egypt. Despite his considerable ambition, Yosef doesn't ever turn away from God. However, he does turn away from his brothers.

Self- Absorption

Beyond the hazards it poses to our relationship with G-d, ambition also causes us to trespass moral red lines. Ambition is an elastic trait, which wraps itself around our noble thoughts and our idealistic values. Ambition convinces us that our aspirations are selfless and serve noble purposes when, more often, we are just feeding our insatiable desire for honor or reputation. Ambition deludes us into believing that we are acting out of public interest when, in reality, we are pursuing personal agendas of honor and fame.

Ambition is so dangerous precisely because it is self-delusional, self-absorbing and deafens us to moral conscience. Unlike easily discernable temptations, the lure of ambition masks itself as idealism. Monsters of unbridled ambition destroy the lives of others, who either impede their goals or distract them from their grand achievements.

Yosef was a dreamer, deeply believed in his own leadership potential, and assumed that he would lead the family into a glorious future. He is the first in sefer Breishit to face the challenge of ambition. Avraham lived in Israel as an itinerant guest without land or home, and Yitzchak lived a sedentary life with little drama and little opportunity for fame and power. For his part, Ya'akov spent his entire life as the underdog, struggling against adversity, with little time for delusions of grandeur.

By contrast, Yosef had eleven other brothers who are also participants in a joint historical project of nation building. Ambition drives Yosef's belief in his own stellar future, and validates any means toward achieving that future, including behavior which appears to be emotionally exploitative. As he rises to power, Yosef may not ignore God, but he neglects his brother's emotional welfare.

Manifest destiny

What about the brothers? It appears they were misled by a different illusion. It wasn't ambition but over-confidence in their manifest destiny which blinded them to moral integrity. The "math" seemed pretty straightforward: Leah, not Rachel was obviously the matriarch of the Jewish future. Though Ya'akov had originally intended to marry Rachel, divine providence intervened, assuring that Leah would be first to wed him. In the ensuing years, fertile Leah bore abundant children, while barren Rachel struggled to bear two. Rachel's early passing was further evidence that she had been disqualified as the mother of Jewish leadership.

Yosef's own behavior merely reinforced the preconceptions of his self-assured brothers. Yosef kept company with the children of handmaidens rather than with the more refined and well-bred children of Ya'akov's actual wives. Yosef's favored relationship with Ya'akov also fit into their simplistic narrative. History was merely repeating itself one generation later. Yitzchak had favored a wicked child, but, luckily, his course was corrected by his wife. By favoring an errant child, Ya'akov was committing a similar error of judgement and it was up to his children to course-correct by sidelining Yosef.

Destiny was very clear, and the brothers were confident that they were on the correct side of history. When held up to the larger calculus of destiny, selling a wayward brother into slavery was dismissed as a necessary and insignificant misdemeanor.

If ambition blinds us to moral codes, confidence in destiny simplifies the moral complexities of life. Belief in a clear and unmistakable future, acquits us of adherence to halacha or to general moral codes.

Sometimes the swagger of destiny is even more hazardous than the blindness of ambition. Intoxicated by destiny, we absolve ourselves of personal conscience. We convince ourselves that history is calling us to something larger than ourselves and larger than our own judgement. Everything is dwarfed by destiny

The land of destiny

We are currently living through Jewish destiny. We have returned to the land promised us by G-d, and are inching closer to the foreshadowed endpoint of history. Our predetermined destiny has never been closer. Beware the folly and false bravado of destiny's call.

Though we have been beckoned to fulfill our national destiny, this land is still inhabited by others who do not acknowledge this destiny. We can't excuse illegal or immoral behavior simply because we are chasing a destiny we believe to be inevitable. Evidently the road to destiny will be more circuitous than we had hoped, but we will ultimately get there.

More importantly, within our own nation and amongst those who share a common destiny, there are many different narratives about how best to achieve that future. The saga of Yosef and his brothers is a tragedy of common destiny but discrepant narratives. Instead of unifying around common destiny they splinter into hatred and rivalry.

Will we fare better? Can we learn to respect different narratives along the road to common destiny. Or will we sell other people and their dreams because we are convinced that our road to destiny is the only route?

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