



Sefer Bereishis - Parshas Vayeshev

Seeing What's in Front of You

During the famine in Canaan, Yakov sent his sons to Egypt, and they were captured and imprisoned. Unbeknownst to them, their captor was actually their long lost brother Yosef. In prison, they discussed their situation:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו, אָבֵל אַשְׁמִים אָנַחְנוּ עַל-אָחִינוּ, אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוֹ אֵלֵינוּ, וְלֹא שָׁמַעְנוּ; עַל-כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ, הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת –

The brothers lamented to each other, “We are guilty for what we did to our brother! We saw his suffering, when he pleaded with us, and we ignored him! We have brought this on ourselves!” (42:21)

But on reviewing the entire episode, no reference is made to Yosef talking to them once their decision was made to get rid of him.

R' Shlomo Freifeld suggests a beautifully simple truism as a resolution.

When a person doesn't want to see something, they are literally blind to it. To the brothers eyes, their minds were made up – he was gone. Of course he begged and cried; but did they notice? Not at all – and the Torah records that he didn't make a sound, because they were the actors in that story. To their eye, he didn't make a noise.

It was only in hindsight, sitting in jail, that they could take stock and relive their terrible ordeal. They saw events with no bias, and realized their folly. They couldn't see the forest for all the trees.

Learning A Lesson

We find that Yosef's brothers harbored animosity to him from childhood:

וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת דְּבָרָתָם רָעָה אֶל אָבִיהֶם –

Yosef brought evil tales to their father. (37:2)

Rashi explains three issues he brought to his fathers attention. The first, that Leah's sons allegedly mistreated Bilhah and Zilpah's sons for being “slaves”; the second, that he suspected them of engaging in unlawful, adulterous relationships; the third, that they ate limbs of live animals.

Rashi notes how Yosef was challenged in each of these three areas later on in life. He accused his brothers of taunting and mistreating “slaves”; and was kidnapped and sold into slavery himself. Having accused his brothers of forbidden relationships, he was challenged by Potiphar’s wife. For accusing them of eating live animals; after being sold, his brothers slaughtered a goat and dipped his coat into it, which they then presented to their father; implying his death. They then ate the goat.

R’ Ezra Hartman points out an issue with this. Regarding adultery and slavery, Yosef was the subject of the challenges – they happened to him, presumably to learn that he had been wrong all those years ago. However, the blood his coat was dipped in did not directly involve Yosef at all. Given that these occurrences appear to be lessons, what was Yosef supposed to learn from it if it didn’t happen to him, and he had no knowledge of it?

R’ Chaim Shmulevitz explains that sometimes, people cannot concede that they were wrong. It hurts too much to admit someone else was right all along. Yosef had to suffer in silence and indignity for many years in prison then slavery before his rise to power. His humiliation at being removed from the family unit was the lesson to be learnt – he’d been wrong all along.

Money and Power – Worthy of Respect?

Yosef had two vivid dreams, that had trappings of prophecy:

וַיַּחְלֵם יוֹסֵף חֲלוֹם, וַיַּגִּד לְאָחָיו; וַיֹּסְפוּ עוֹד, שְׁנֵי אֲתוֹ. וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲלֵיהֶם: שְׁמַעוּ-נָא, הַחֲלוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חָלַמְתִּי. וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי חֹנֵן מֵאֱלֹמִים אֱלֹמִים, בְּתוֹךְ הַשָּׂדֶה, וְהִנֵּה קִמָּה אֶלְמָתִי, וְגַם-נִצְבָּה; וְהִנֵּה תִסְבִּינָה אֵלַי תִּיכֶם, וְתִשְׁתַּחֲוּיִן לְאֶלְמָתִי. וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ, אָחָיו, הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּמְלֹךְ עָלֵינוּ, אִם-מִשׁוֹל תִּמְשָׁל בָּנוּ; וַיֹּסְפוּ עוֹד שְׁנֵי אֲתוֹ, עַל-חֲלֹמֹתָיו וְעַל-דְּבָרָיו. וַיַּחְלֵם עוֹד חֲלוֹם אַחֵר, וַיֹּסְפֵר אֵתוֹ לְאָחָיו; וַיֹּאמֶר, הִנֵּה חָלַמְתִּי חֲלוֹם עוֹד, וְהִנֵּה הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְאַחַד עֶשְׂרֵת כּוֹכָבִים, מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לִי. וַיֹּסְפֵר אֶל-אָבִיו, וְאֶל-אָחָיו, וַיִּגְעַר-בּוֹ אָבִיו, וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מָה הַחֲלוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חָלַמְתָּ: הֲבֹא נְבוֹא, אֲנִי וְאַמְךָ וְאָחֶיךָ, לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לָךְ, אֲרָצָה. וַיִּקְנָאוּ-בּוֹ, אָחָיו ...

Yosef dreamt a dream, and told it to his brothers, and they continued to hate him. He said to them, “Listen to this dream I dreamt! We were binding bundles in the field, and mine arose, and stood upright; then your bundles encircled and prostrated themselves to my bundle.” So his brothers said to him, “Will you reign over us, or will you rule over us!?” And they continued to hate him for his dreams and his words. He dreamed another dream, and related it to his brothers. He said, “I have dreamed another dream; the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were prostrating themselves to me.” He told his father and to his brothers; and his father told him off and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Will your mother and I, and your brothers, prostrate ourselves to you to the ground?” And his brothers envied him... (37:5-11)

The dreams were not empty visions – they were prophecies.

The Beis Halevi explains how the bundled grain dream relates to the material wealth and power Yosef would accrue; Yosef’s incredible rise to governor of Egypt, owner of all the grain stores in the empire, and as a result, his vast wealth. The dream about the stars and

heavenly bodies correlate to spirituality – Yosef is called Tzaddik Yesod Olam, the support structure of the universe. After his birth, Yakov felt safe to leave Lavan’s house because Yosef was now with them. Only a very particular type of individual could surpass the test in Poitphar’s house.

R’ Ezra Hartman explains how the brothers reactions differentiated with each dream. Wealth is external to a person; it does not define or become part of him. This is related very subtly, where they did not bow to him, but to his bundle – אֲלֵמֵ תִיכֶם, וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוּיִן לְאֵלֶימָתִי. Perhaps this is why they hated him, that they misunderstood him and thought that somehow great wealth would mean he ought to rule them – אִם-מְשׁוֹל תִּמְשַׁל בָּנוּ. The dream about the bundles engendered hatred – וַיִּסְפוּ עוֹד שָׁנָא אֶת־ו.ו.

But with the stars, they did not bow to a representation of Yosef, but rather, כּוֹכָבִים, – מִשְׁתַּחֲוּיִם לִי – they bowed to him, himself. This dream about the stars, hinting to his holiness and the spiritual attainments he would achieve, engendered jealousy – וַיִּקְנְאוּ-בּוֹ, אָחִיו.

It seems that the dream about wealth did not engender jealousy, only hatred, perhaps on a misunderstanding that he believed that wealth and power were worthy of bowing towards. Greater wealth does not make a better man, hence their retort. But the dreams about spirituality were not something to hate him for – they could use their jealousy as a motivational tool.

There was no such anger to the dream about spirituality – וַיִּקְנְאוּ-בּוֹ, אָחִיו. Bettering oneself is the only currency that counts, and they knew it.

The Beis Halevi explains how the bundled grain dream related to the physical; Yosef’s incredible future rise to governor of Egypt, future owner of all the grain stores in the empire, and subsequently, his vast amounts of wealth. The dream about the stars and heavenly bodies correlated to spirituality – Yosef is called Yosef HaTzaddik, the righteous, the foundation of the universe.

R Ezra Hartman explains how this differentiated his brothers reactions to each dream. Wealth is external to a person; it does not define him, is not a part of him. This is related very subtly, where they did not bow to **him**, but to his bundle – אֲלֵמֵ תִיכֶם, וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוּיִן לְאֵלֶימָתִי. Perhaps this is why they hated him, that they misunderstood him and thought that somehow great wealth would mean he ought to rule them – אִם-מְשׁוֹל תִּמְשַׁל בָּנוּ. The dream about the bundles engendered hatred – וַיִּסְפוּ עוֹד שָׁנָא אֶת־ו.ו.

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It seems that the dream about wealth did not engender jealousy, only hatred, perhaps as

described above. The dreams about spirituality were not something to hate him for – they could use their jealousy as a motivational tool. But regarding his immense wealth, there was nothing to be jealous of – wealth doesn't make someone better, hence their retort.

There was no such retort to the dream about spirituality. Bettering oneself is the only currency that counts, and they knew it.

Paradoxical Experiment

After his brothers trap Yosef in a pit, Reuven returns to ensure his safety:

– וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיִּצְלֵהוּ מִיַּדָּם וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא נִכְנְוּ נַפְשׁ
 Reuven heard and saved him from their hands. (37:21)

It makes little sense that Reuven “saved” Yosef – he did no such thing! He cast Yosef into a pit with snakes and scorpions; how is this considered rescuing Yosef?

The Toras Nesanel explains that Chazal understand that the brothers had sentenced Yosef to death because he had his own designs in how the family dynamic would work, usurping Yehuda; he indicated that he was the destined to be king, and they accused him explicitly, “Do you think you will rule over us!?”.

The Gemara in Brachos teaches that one who is modest in the bathroom is rewarded by being safe from snakes, scorpions; and his dreams come true.

Reuven was unsure of whether Yosef was dreaming of overthrowing Yehuda; or whether Yosef's dreams were prophetic, and he truly would be king. So he devised a way to see if his dreams were true – would he be safe from snakes and scorpions?

He cast Yosef into a pit with snakes and scorpions and waited to see whether he would be injured or safe. If he remained unharmed, then this indicated that Yosef was modest, in which case his dreams are true and wasn't rebelling against anyone; he had dreamed the future. If Yosef were unharmed, this would prove his innocence. In this way, he saved Yosef.

The Medrash teaches that had Reuven known that the Torah would record that he saved Yosef by throwing him into the pit, he immediately would have taken Yosef upon his shoulders and returned him to his father.

That is, had Reuven known that the Torah wrote that the test “saved Yosef”, proving his dreams were, demonstrating his innocence, he would have immediately returned Yosef to his father. Reuven wasn't to know at the time what the outcome was!

Everything Happens for a Reason

Whilst imprisoned, Yosef predicted his fellow inmate, the butler's redemption and

restoration to office. He requested not be forgotten: **כִּי אִם זְכַרְתֶּנִּי אֶתְּךָ כְּאֲשֶׁר יִיטֵב לְךָ וְעִשִּׂיתָ: נָא עִמְדִי חֶסֶד וְהִזְכַּרְתֶּנִּי אֶל פְּרַעֲהַ וְהוֹצֵאתֶנִּי מִן הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה –**
 Because that if you will remember me when things go well with you, please do me a favor and mention me to Pharaoh, and you will get me out of this place.” (40:14).

The words **כִּי אִם** do not really belong here, as the translation clearly shows – they do not seem to make any sense. **כִּי אִם** translates loosely as “because that”. The translation produced is not helpful in understanding what he said. What is it then there for?

There was a story told by the Brisker Rav about the Rav of Kovno. At the time, Napoleon’s armies were sweeping through Eastern Europe. The lords and gentry sought to please Napoleon as his armies passed through their lands, and they threw a lavish feast in his honor. The leaders each took their turn to present him and his delegation with gifts.

Napoleon was a proponent of emancipation and equality; he noticed no Jewish representative had appeared. After questioning, the local gentry explained that it was inappropriate for Jews to be involved in diplomatic affairs. He angered, and insisted they bring a Rabbi. The frightened gentry sent for the Rabbi from the nearest town – the Rav of Kovno. Napoleon asked that he say something truthful, something he considered was lacking in the previous platitudes and speeches. The gentry were quaking at this point. What would he say?

The Rav said that he had never understood what Yosef had meant by **כִּי אִם**, until that evening. The butler that was innocent – he couldn’t protect the king’s glass from a fly falling in. Nevertheless, he was imprisoned. For what purpose?

“**כִּי אִם זְכַרְתֶּנִּי אֶתְּךָ כְּאֲשֶׁר יִיטֵב לְךָ –**
 It is precisely because you here that you must remember me when things go well for you.”

In the same way that Mordechai said to Esther that she was incidental to God’s master plan, and the way Moshe is not mentioned in the Hagada for the same reason; Yosef said that everything happens for a reason. Events had brought them together – the reason was to get Yosef out of prison.

The Rav explained to Napoleon that circumstances conspired to bring Napoleon to Eastern Europe. The Rav proceeded to tell Napoleon how the Jews were oppressed, and Napoleon could help them. Napoleon applauded, and he saved them (albeit temporarily!) by removing the gentry’s stewardship over the Jews .

Everything happens for a reason, sometimes it just takes a little perspective.

Breaking the chain

The Shalshelas is a rare cantor’s note, a tremendous literary device, that makes just four appearances in the entire Chumash– in Lech Lecha 19:16; in Chayei Sarah 24:12; in

Vayeshev 39:8; and in Tzav 8:23.

In Chayei Sarah, we find that Eliezer, Avraham's most trusted servant, is charged with finding a wife for Yitzchak. He is not allowed to take a wife from Canaan. The Midrash tells us that Eliezer had a daughter and it could have been that he might 'just not have found' a suitable wife outside Canaan. This could have left the path open for his daughter. Nevertheless, Eliezer overcomes any personal attachments and prays that Hashem heed his master's request. This triumph over his own desires is signified by the Shalshelas on the word – ויאמר the opening word of his prayer.

In Vayeshev we see the tremendous personal struggle that Joseph had to overcome. Indeed, by running out and leaving his coat behind in the hands of his master's wife, he got himself into more trouble in some ways. But on a personal level, he could not afford to be in the house a moment longer, refusing his master's wife's advances. That very word – וימאן (and he refused), has a שלשלת on it, denoting the breaking of his own potential negative desires.

As for the final appearance – in Tzav – the Midrash tells us that Moshe Rabbeinu was the Kohen Gadol until the end of the Miluim, the first week of the Mishkan's use, at which point he had to hand over the position to his brother Aharon (according to various sources, because he had argued at the burning bush). It must have been hard for him. Yet he overcame any personal desires and handed over the baton wholeheartedly. His final act as High Priest was ...וישחט no surprises about the musical note on this word, at the point of his breaking with his own emotion.

Looking back at Lech Lecha, we see from Rashi that the Torah tells us that the angels had to grab hold of Lot because he was tarrying... leaving behind all his possessions. The first word of the Pasuk, which means he hesitated, contains a – שלשלת he overcame his physical desire for wealth and grabbed reality with both hands... literally.

It is no accident that Shalshelas actually means a chain. Furthermore, if you listen to its sound, it is elongated (3x a – פזר Pazer, another musical note – which is long already), yet comes to an abrupt end, thus breaking the chain. The person it is used about has transcended.

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