

When Being Right is Wrong



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HaTorah

Our parsha this week, Vayigash, culminates the story of Yosef's deception of his brothers. Yosef reveals his true identity and tries to reunify with his brothers after decades of separation. Throughout the story, Yosef has deliberately planned and executed each step and we would have anticipated that Yosef's revealing himself would be a clean and deliberate act.

That is not what happened.

And Yosef could not restrain himself before all those that stood by him; and he cried, "Remove every man from me." And no man stood with him, while Yosef made himself known to his brothers. (45:1)

The verse indicates that Yosef intended to maintain his deception, if he had not become overwhelmed with compassion for his brothers' agony. Yosef seemed to have allowed his emotions to overpower his judgement. Was this a failure of character?

The verse also begs the question: What result did Yosef hope to achieve had he maintained the deception of his brothers past this point? How did Yosef plan for the story to play out?

In our attempt to answer these questions, we should address a more basic issue: What permitted Yosef to deceive his brothers and father in this way? Some have noted the parallel between the predicament in which Yosef placed his brothers, and the situation Yosef and his brothers were in when they sold Yosef into slavery and showed no compassion for him. When the brothers sold Yosef, they displayed no compassion to Rachel Imeinu's son - Yaakov's cherished son. Would they repeat the same transgression by abandoning Yaakov's second favored son, Rachel's second son, Binyamin, or would they use the opportunity to "fix" their previous bad behavior by caring for him? Perhaps Yosef was offering his brothers that chance.

But would Yosef be permitted to place his father and brothers into an emotional nightmare if he believed it may bring the brothers to repent? Wouldn't it also violate the precept to honor his father and teacher, Yaakov?

Ramban resolves this issue by pointing out a strange detail the Torah inexplicably adds when Yosef, the viceroy of Egypt, sees his brothers on their first trip to Egypt. After mentioning that Yosef recognized his brothers but they did not recognize him, the Torah reveals that Yosef remembered the dreams from his youth and spoke harshly to his brothers. What is instructive about Yosef's memory of his dreams? Why does the Torah include this detail? Ramban explains that Yosef's seeing his ten brothers prostrating themselves before him reminded him of the dream he had of his eleven brothers' sheaves of grain prostrating themselves before Yosef's sheaf. There appears to be a prophetic message in the dream that Yosef had to realize. Ramban explains that the discrepancy between only **ten** brothers prostrating as opposed to the **eleven** sheaves prostrating indicated to Yosef that the prophecy that he had received as a lad was an imperative to produce a situation where all of his eleven brothers would prostrate before him. The main goal of Yosef's plan wasn't to prompt his brothers to repent and correct their flaws. It was to effectuate the images portrayed in his dreams.

It's unclear why Yosef was so confident that the method for discharging the images of his dreams should be through disguise and deception. Potentially, Yosef understood that he was supposed to bring about the dreams himself without his brothers' assistance, as he alone received the prophecies. Alternatively, it may have been the fact that in the first dream, the brothers' sheaves were not bowing to Yosef, but rather to Yosef's sheaf, and in the last dream the sun, moon and stars were bowing to Yosef himself. This may have indicated that until the situation of the last dream was re-created, the brothers should not perceive that it was to Yosef they were bowing.

Either way, once all eleven brothers bowed to Yosef, he needed to bring about the depiction illustrated in Yosef's second dream - the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing to Yosef. This dream indicated a second stage where Yaakov, one of his wives, and Yosef's eleven brothers would bow to Yosef.

Yosef continued his deception even after the prophecy of the first dream was realized, which clearly indicated his intention to achieve the second stage through that same deception.

When Yosef instructed his servants to remove everyone except his brothers and he revealed his true identity to them, did Yosef allow his emotions to thwart his fulfillment of the prophecy of the second dream of the sun, moon and stars? Is the Torah presenting an ideal we should emulate, to allow our personal emotions to prevent us from achieving Hashem's will?

Before answering that question, it would be constructive to look back to the brothers' first journey to Egypt, the trip without Binyamin, when the brothers expressed their regret and contrition for what they had done to Yosef. The Torah says:

"And they said one to another: Truly, we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the anguish of his soul, when he begged us, and we did not hear; therefore this distress is coming on us".

It's interesting to note that the brothers did not express regret regarding the act of capturing and selling Yosef. Their regret was simply that they had not listened to Yosef's cries to them.

If selling Yosef was an evil act, wouldn't it be more sensible to bemoan that action? In fact, Seforno explains the brothers believed that Yosef's intentions were sinister and that thwarting his efforts was a righteous endeavor. If the brothers believed that capturing and selling Yosef was prudent and proper, why should the brothers have listened to Yosef's petitions? Wouldn't that simply distract them from acting appropriately?

Perhaps Yosef's decision to abandon his plan and reveal himself to his brothers, as well as his brothers' contrition for not properly considering Yosef's pleading, emphasize to us the same moral lesson. If an action is good and appropriate in its own right, it doesn't mean the end justifies the means. It is crucial that we consider the impact our action will have on others and adjust our action based upon that consideration .

Oftentimes, a person is focused on doing the right thing, even when the moral action may cause pain to another person. It's easy to coldly dismiss the pain our actions bring to others when we are doing the "right" thing.

The brothers understood from Yosef's detrimental behavior that they must thwart his plans. In retrospect, the brothers realized that they should have chosen a plan less painful for Yosef and Yaakov. Similarly, Yosef realized that the strategy he had selected to achieve the prophecy of his second dream did not sufficiently consider the agony it would bring to his brothers and father. Consequently, he abandoned that plan for one

less agonizing to them.

It is critical that we strive to live and act in line with Hashem's will. However, sometimes in that pursuit, we convince ourselves that the nobility of our deeds far outweighs the impact those deeds may have on others. The story of Yosef and his brothers allows us to explore and learn from the undertakings of our ancestors and the repercussions of those undertakings.

With Hashem's help, let us consider the impact our most noble actions have on others. Let us seek behavior that is noble in its own right and considerate in its impact on others.

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