



Parshat HaShavuah

וישב

VAYESHEV

כ' כסלו תשע"ד

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Ashreinu

חלקינו מה טוב

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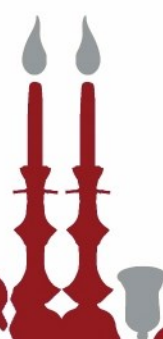
Sunset

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Motzei

Shabbat

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Enriching and Enhancing Your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion

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STICKS & STONES MAY BREAK BONES, BUT WORDS CAN DO MUCH WORSE

RABBI BEN SUGERMAN

A seismic event in Jewish History is the sale of Yosef into slavery. During Mussaf on Yom Kippur, the author of the *piyut*

(liturgy) references a midrash that describes how ten great rabbis, including R' Akiva, living generations after the event still had to pay the price for the sale of Yosef and were brutally murdered by the Romans as divine punishment for the acts of the ten brothers selling Yosef.

The straightforward message of the incident is the destructive force of שנאת חנם, baseless hatred, and how it can destroy a family. While not attempting to exonerate them, what, if any, justification did the brothers have to commit such an act? Can we provide any context to their actions?

The Seforno, a 16th century commentary, offers an original interpretation that adds some context to the story. The critical pasuk that describes the confrontation between Yosef and his brothers reads as follows:

“וַיֵּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרֶחֶק וּבִטְרֵם יִקְרַב אֵלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְנַקְלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ” (37:18)

The standard translation of the pasuk is that the brothers see Yosef from afar, and before he gets close, they plot to kill him. This is how Rashi understands the pasuk, but there is one textual problem with this translation: the second occurrence of the word אותו. It's extra.

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THE ULTIMATE SIBLING RIVALRY

TAMAR TANGIR ('17)

Although it may seem as though sibling rivalry only pertains to you, we learn in פרשת וישב that even the most memorable צדיקים in our history experienced this as well. Jealousy and hatred are attributes that we all possess; however, these traits are sometimes only apparent in certain circumstances. Yaakov loves Yosef the most out of his twelve sons because Yosef is born in Yaakov's old age. This favoritism sparks the brothers' animosity toward Yosef. There are many commentaries that explain that Yosef at times acts ignorantly and haughtily, which increases the brothers' jealousy and fuels their hatred.

Where do we see this "ignorance" from Yosef? When Yosef tells his brothers his dreams, which foreshadow his future as a leader, he does not seem to realize that perhaps his dreams will only anger the brothers even more and increase their resentment. Due to Yosef's naiveté, sibling rivalry develops among Yaakov's sons. This error on Yosef's part will cause the brothers to sell him, which will eventually lead him into slavery in Egypt.

We see that sibling rivalry is present even among Yaakov's children, some of our greatest ancestors. It obviously has serious effects as we see it can result in the destruction of an entire family—Yaakov's.

IMPORTANT LESSONS

ARIEL BUGAY ('15)


Perek 38 discusses the story of Yehuda and Tamar. Reading this story, many questions arise. One of the most prominent is: why is this story involving Yehuda and Tamar placed right in between the story of Yosef being sold and Yosef interpreting the dreams?

Rashi explains that once the brothers realize the pain they caused Yaakov with the devastating news of Yosef's "death," they are furious with Yehuda for convincing them to sell Yosef. After being tormented by the brothers, Yehuda decides to depart on his own as the Torah states: "וַיֵּרֶד יְהוּדָה מֵאֶת אָחָיו"—"And Yehuda went down from his brothers" (38:1).

While off on his own, Yehuda marries the daughter of Shua, and she gives birth to three sons. The first two sons each die shortly after marrying Tamar. After experiencing the death of the first two sons, Yehuda does not want his third son to marry Tamar, thinking that she is the reason for their deaths. Therefore, Yehuda tells Tamar to wait until the third son grows older. Sometime thereafter, Yehuda's wife dies. Tamar hears about the death and meets Yehuda at a crossroads. However, Yehuda does not recognize that this woman is Tamar because she covers her face with a veil. She sleeps with him, and Yehuda gives her several items as collateral.

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Bugay continued

Shortly afterwards, Tamar becomes pregnant. Yehuda (as head of a rabbinical court) declares that she is deserving of the death penalty for becoming pregnant while unmarried. As she is being marched to her death, she says the owner of Yehuda's items is the father of the baby. Yehuda realizes what has transpired and the sin that he has committed. Yehuda then admits to his wrongdoing and does teshuva.

In answering the question raised above, this story teaches us as Jews very important lessons about embarrassing people and doing teshuva. Tamar goes to great lengths in order not to embarrass Yehuda. She is willing to die rather than expose him as a sinner. Additionally, Yehuda teaches us the great lesson of teshuva. Once he realizes his mistake he repents wholeheartedly. As reward for both of these actions, Hashem ensures that Mashiach will come from this family line. This is the ultimate proof that both Yehuda and Tamar acted in the appropriate ways given the awkward situation.

EVERY ACTION MATTERS

EZRA SPLAYER ('15)

This week's parsha includes the infamous encounter between Potiphar's wife and Yosef. Potiphar's wife grabs Yosef by his garment and says, "lay with me." Yosef refuses and runs away from her, but he leaves his garment behind. Potiphar's wife uses the garment (*beged* in Hebrew) to frame Yosef, which results in his imprisonment.

Rabbi Shalom Noach Brezovsky explains that the root of the word *beged* can also mean betrayal. The word betrayal is related to clothing in that one's clothing often gives others impressions which are frequently false. So too, one person can betray another by giving off a false impression.

In this case, Potiphar's wife is trying to trick Yosef into sleeping with her. Often people believe that their actions do not matter once they are already in an insignificant position. Potiphar's wife believes Yosef has this negative mindset and will think, "I have already been sold by my brothers down to Egypt and now I am a lowly servant. What difference does it make if I make one transgression?" However, Yosef's attitude is the exact opposite. He refuses to sleep with her and says, "There is no one greater than me in this house." Yosef holds himself to a high esteem and high standard, and he understands that every action counts.

This exact mindset is the attitude that one must have. In Mishna Sanhedrin (4:5) it says, "Every person is obligated to say that the world was created for me." Saying this implies that each individual plays a major role in creation and is therefore of great significance. Just like Yosef, we should all possess the quality of being positive even through hard times and realize that each and every action matters.



Rabbi Sugerman continued

There simply is no need to include that word for the pasuk to make its point (see Rashi on that pasuk where he acknowledges this and attempts to explain).

The Seforno therefore gives a radically new understanding of the pasuk's inclusion of the word **אוֹתוֹ**. The last three words of the pasuk should be read like this, **וַיִּתְנַלּוּ אוֹתוֹ**—they thought that he [Yosef] was plotting, **לְהַמִּיתוֹ**—to kill them. (One difficulty with his interpretation is that the last word should be **לְהַמִּיתָם**, which Seforno admits is an issue.)

Otherwise stated, the brothers actually think that Yosef is coming after them and threatening them and endangering their lives. Perhaps their fear is prompted by Yosef's dreams; perhaps it is the clear favoritism that their father exhibits; perhaps it is the fact that Yosef has gotten them in trouble in the past. They felt threatened, and as an act of self-defense they did what they felt necessary to remove the threat.

A very novel approach but with one glaring problem: how can the brothers actually feel threatened by Yosef? There are ten of them and only one of him. Furthermore, among the ten of them are Shimon and Levi, who but one parsha ago decimated an entire city. Are we really considering the possibility that the ten of them really felt threatened by Yosef?

The Seforno addresses this issue and gives a very powerful insight. Up until this point, what was Yosef's modus operandi? The beginning of the parsha tells us that he delivers a bad report about his brothers to their father. Yosef was able to instill fear into the brothers by simply maligning them. Had it been a physical altercation, the brothers would clearly have had nothing to fear. It is the spoken word that threatens them to their core. It is the thought that Yosef might once again report them to their father that makes them feel powerless and vulnerable.

The obvious lesson of this Seforno is that we must consider our words, both verbal and written, more carefully. Our words can do more damage than anything that we can do with our fists. Words can destroy a reputation that was built over a lifetime and can easily shrink someone's esteem. A comment, a post, a tweet, or a blog can leave devastating effects. Let us be more considerate of the power of the word.

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