

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayeshev)

Many years ago, at a Melaveh Malka (Saturday night party accompanying the end of Shabbat) in Har Nof in the Bostoner Beis Medrash I heard a wonderful story from Rav Levi Yitzchak Horowitz, z"tzl, the Bostoner Rebbe.

It seems that after Reb Yissachar, the Rebbe of Nickelsburg, passed away Reb Shmelke (Rav Shmuel Horowitz, the Bostoner Rebbe's ancestor, who was to become one of the great leaders of world Jewry) was appointed to be the new Rebbe. When he was shown his new home, which had been the home of Reb Yissachar, he seemed distracted and barely paid attention to the tour of the home, finally explaining:

"There is a most remarkable smell in this house! It must be from an amazing Mitzvah (good deed) that was done here!"

But no one seemed to be able to come up with a story of Reb Yissachar that would justify to Reb Shmelke such a wonderful smell. The Rebbe became obsessed with knowing the source of this wonderful aroma and quizzed relatives and townsfolk, but no-one had a story that was extraordinary enough to justify such a smell.

One day as Reb Shmelke was walking in town a non-Jewish woman approached him and said she had heard he was looking for an especially good deed Reb Yissachar had done. Though she was not sure it was what he was looking for she shared with him the following story.

She had been employed as a maid in the home of Reb Yissachar. Her first day of work was the eve of Pesach (Passover) and soon after she arrived the Rebbe and his wife and their adult children were all out at the market or doing errands to prepare for the festival, and she was left at home to watch over the little children and babies. A short while later, the children awoke and started to cry, and she realized they were hungry but could not find anything she could give them to eat.

Searching through the house, she recounted, "I finally found a box full of some large round crackers, so I gave them to the children to eat."

Reb Shmelke immediately understood that she was obviously referring to the hand baked Shmurah Matzoth which had been meticulously watched over and prepared, from the time the wheat was harvested in the field through the painstaking kneading and baking process, and that they had been hidden in a cupboard to ensure that no water would come into contact with them which might render them unusable.

Such matzoth are the pride of any Seder and the Rebbe's matzoth must have been quite expensive; he had probably baked and supervised their preparation himself....

Later that morning everyone returned and began preparing for the festival, setting the table, heating up the food, laying out the haggadot, preparing the Seder plate and setting aside the wine for the Seder that evening.

After dressing for the festival, with the holiday about to begin, the Rebbe sent his oldest children to go and retrieve the box of matzoth to lay them on the Seder plate. But the matzoth were nowhere to be found. Panicking, the entire family stopped what they were doing and began desperately hunting for the matzoth, to no avail.

After a time, seeing their distress the maid suddenly realized what they were looking for, and what she had done.

“Gathering up my courage” she explained, “I approached the Rebbe and explained what I had done, unknowingly feeding the prized crackers to the children. There was a moment of silence as everyone took in what had just happened. I was sure I was about to lose my job which I desperately needed. And then the Rebbe smiled an enormous smile, and thanked me for taking such good care of their children. And without a trace of anger or even a hint of being annoyed promptly turned to his wife and asked her to get some regular matzos while he went off to Synagogue.”

And Reb Shmelke smiled, understanding immediately why that house had been blessed with such a sweet aroma.

Empathy; Emotion researchers on Wikipedia define empathy as:

“The ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling”.

But I would add that empathy includes actually caring about those feelings, even enough to change one’s own behavior as a result.

Hidden in this week’s challenging and painful story of the sale of Joseph is a powerful lesson on this topic.

One of the most tragic characters in the Bible is Reuven the first-born son of Yaakov who never quite lives up to all he might have been. Indeed, it is Reuven whom the Torah tells us actually tried to save Joseph from being sold though he seems to inexplicably disappear in the middle of the story.

Indeed, the Torah tells us, after Joseph’s brothers (who hate him; *Bereishit* (Genesis) 37:4) conspire to kill him (ibid. 37:20) and subsequently throw him in a pit and sell him as a slave (ibid. v. 24-28):

“And Reuven returned to the pit, and behold Yosef was not in the pit, and he (Reuven) tore his clothes (in agony). And he returned to his brothers and said:

HaYeled Einenu’ Va’Ani, Anah Ani Bah?”

“The boy is gone! And I - where will I come?” (Ibid. v. 29-30)

It is interesting that when we are introduced to Joseph at the beginning of this story (37:2) he is described as a seventeen-year-old *na'ar*; a lad. Yet here (37:30) Reuven calls him a *yeled*, a boy. Perhaps Reuven is not seeing Yosef as a young man coming of age, but rather as a boy whose mother passed away (see *ibid.* 35:19) and needs his help. After all, Reuven is the *bechor*, the first born who should be responsible for his younger brothers.

Indeed, it is Reuven who convinces the brothers to abandon their plan to kill Joseph and suggests instead that they throw him in a pit:

*“And Re’uven heard, and saved him (Joseph) from their hands, and said: ‘let us not kill him’. And Re’uven said to them do not spill blood! Throw him in this pit... but lay no hand on him, **intending to rescue him** from their hand, and return him to their father.”* (*Ibid.* 37:21-22)

So why did he not rescue him? What went wrong? How different Jewish history would have been if Reuven had succeeded in rescuing Joseph from being sold as a slave! Why would he leave in the middle of the story and not realize by the time he returned it might be too late?

There is a fascinating moment of candor between the brothers in next week’s portion, *Miketz*, which sheds light on this question:

Twenty years after Joseph disappeared, there is a terrible famine in the land, and the brothers are forced to journey down to Egypt for food. One wonders, knowing Joseph was sold as a slave to Egypt, how the brothers feel about venturing down to Egypt. Have they put this episode aside burying it in the past? Do they feel guilty even twenty years later for such a heinous act? Will they look for Joseph and attempt to make amends?

Things quickly go from bad to worse, they are accused by the viceroy (whom they seem not to recognize as Joseph) of being spies, their brother Shimon is taken captive, and they are told they will not be allowed back to buy food without bringing down their brother Benjamin back with them, which they understand might kill their father Yaakov....

And in the midst of all this, bemoaning their misfortune, they say to each other

“...but we are guilty for our brother when we saw his distress when he beseeched us, and we did not listen, therefore has this calamity befallen us.” (*ibid.* 42:21)

“And Reuven responded to them saying: ‘did I not tell you not to sin against the boy, and you did not listen! And now his blood his being demanded!’” (*ibid.* 42:21):

There is something ‘off’ with this dialogue. The brothers obviously feel guilty for the terrible act they committed all those years ago, but fascinatingly, it does not say they regret **selling** him! It just says they regret not empathizing with his distress! Don’t they realize they have done a terrible thing in selling their brother?!

There are two ways to approach this obvious question. One might say the brothers felt they were right to sell, or get rid of Joseph, much like Yishmael was sent away in favor of Yitzchak (*ibid* 21:9-14) , and Yaakov was blessed in lieu of Esau (*ibid* 27:29) to rule over him. As such they had no remorse over selling him, they only felt bad about how much pain it caused him.

But there is another way to look at it, as the **Rashbam** (one of the grandchildren of Rashi) suggests: Reuven never intended to sell Joseph; he simply suggested they throw him into a pit as opposed to killing him (Ibid. 37:21-22). After all, with the brothers so angry, the smartest thing to do was to buy some time so everyone could cool down.

Only when the brothers see an Ishmaelite caravan approaching does Reuven realize (once hearing Yehuda's suggestion to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites) that time is running out.

So, he makes his excuses and goes back to the pit (it makes sense the brothers would not eat lunch right next to the pit where Joseph was apparently crying and begging ...) only to discover the boy is gone! A passing caravan of Midianites (ibid 37:28) had passed by in the meantime and **they** had taken Joseph ultimately selling him to the Egyptians!

(For a wonderful treatment of the possibility that the brothers never actually sold Joseph though they had conspired to do so, see Rav Menachem Leibtag's informative article on the topic: Who really sold Yosef? <https://outorah.org/p/37221>)

Of course, this begs the obvious question: if in fact the brothers had not actually sold Joseph, then what was their great sin? Judaism does not hold a person accountable for what he *wants* to do, even if ethically a person might have some work to do in terms of character development, if he wants to do something against Hashem (G-d's) will.

There is no transgression in *wanting* to eat a cheeseburger, only in actually eating one.

Perhaps then the real transgression here was not that they sold Joseph, but that they were indifferent to his pain, as they finally realize so many years later:

"...but we are guilty for our brother when we saw his distress when he beseeched us, and we did not listen, therefore has this calamity befallen us." (ibid. 42:21)

Indeed, the brothers will only finally reunite as the family of Israel when Yehuda steps forward (ibid. 44:33) and offers himself as a slave in place of his younger brother Benjamin demonstrating the sensitivity he and the brothers were missing, which was what led to the tragic story of Joseph's being sold in the first place.

It is worth noting that Yehuda in his finest hour (ibid. v. 30, 31) again refers to Joseph in the original story as having been a **na'ar**, a lad. Yet Reuven, when castigating the brothers in Egypt, again refers to him as a **yeled**, a boy. (ibid. 42:21)

Perhaps this was part of the problem; Reuven sees Joseph as a boy and does not feel the need to take his feelings into account. He is not considering what Joseph might be feeling; Reuven seems to be all about Reuven. Indeed, when exclaiming in despair (37: 29-30) 'the boy is gone!' his reaction is:

"Va'Ani, Anah Ani Bah?"

*"As for **me**, where will **I** come?"*

Reuven's great concern seems to be for ... Reuven. But when Yehuda steps forward to take responsibility for Binyamin in what might have become 'Joseph II' he sees the lad foremost, and not himself.

Reb Shmelke of Nickelsburg was sensitive enough to see the non-Jewish maid standing before him, and not the box of matzoth that was gone. In order for the family of Yaakov to become the nation of Israel we needed to learn that it's not all about us, and only when we see the pain of others as greater than ourselves will we be ready to be partners in creating a better world.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman