



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Miketz - Awakening Sensitivity

In last week's parsha we read of the brothers' hostility to Joseph, how they planned to murder him and how they sold him to slavery in Egypt.

We never hear the brothers regret their actions; even after they witness their father's deep grief.

But then Joseph has the brothers (falsely) accused of spying, and incarcerated for three days in an Egyptian jail. (Were they interrogated, even tortured, by the Egyptian secret-service?) At this point we are privy to a fascinating exchange:

They said to one another, "Indeed, we are guilty on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us." ²²Then Reuben spoke up and said to them, "Did I not tell you, 'Do no wrong to the boy'? But you paid no heed. Now comes the reckoning for his blood." (43:21-22)

This is an intriguing scene because the brothers are almost reliving the scenes of Joseph's sale with mutual recriminations and a reawakening of their guilt. Twenty-two years have passed, and they are discussing Joseph's sale as if it were yesterday.

The recalling of this long buried episode here at this juncture represents the awakening of the brothers' conscience. Joseph's heartrending pleas for mercy more than they emanate from the pit, now well up from the depths of their own hearts. (Prof. Meir Weiss)

When, in Parashat Vayeshev, Joseph was abandoned in the pit and then sold, the chumash failed to depict Joseph's screams and pleas; his cries are totally absent from the narrative. Suddenly, at this juncture, the brothers articulate this highly significant piece of information! Why do we, the reader, hear this detail specifically at this point? It is because now, at this moment, the brothers "hear" Joseph's cries for

the first time; this is the moment that those cries sink in. At the time, they were hot-headed and filled with hatred and indignation; they were simply cold, incensed, uncaring and deaf; now they can become open to “hearing” Joseph.

As the brothers experience the vulnerability of false accusation, the experience of slavery, the desperation of being absolutely powerless, they begin to understand events from Joseph’s vantage point. This statement, “we are guilty on account of our brother,” the hearing of Joseph’s cries, is the start of a process whereby they begin to grapple with their criminal actions towards their brother.

Later still, they will take responsibility for Binyamin, Joseph’s brother, protecting him and offering to become slaves in his stead. In this way, Joseph grants the brothers a “second chance” to defend and protect a son of Rachel, in contrast to their cruelty and cold-heartedness to Joseph some years earlier. They get the opportunity to right the wrongs of the past.

To discuss:

Why could the brothers “hear” Joseph’s screams only now? Is it because:

- They have just experienced false accusation and jail... now they know what it is like.
- They are older, they have families of their own, and maybe sons who are 17. They are more open now.
- At the time they were emotionally agitated. Now they can think more clearly.

For further discussion:

- Have you ever done something wrong and only realized its true impact later? What brought you to that realization?
- Why do we have guilt-feelings, an active moral conscience? Is this God’s way of allowing us to sense when we have made mistakes?
- Why are we sometimes deaf to the plight of others in distress? Is it merely rivals towards whom we lack proper sensitivity, or strangers, the elderly etc.? How can our sensitivities be awakened?

Shabbat Shalom!