

Revenge Is Not as Fulfilling as it May Seem

Parashat Mikketz 5781

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“If you want revenge, then dig two graves.”

I can't prove that Confucius actually said this, but there is a certain wisdom there. Getting even with a person who wronged us, exacting revenge even after many years sounds so perfect. But inevitably, those who seek revenge find it is not so satisfying. For some, holding on to the pent-up anger, exacting retribution can hurt as much as it heals.

Parashat Miketz describes Joseph's revenge scheme against his brothers, and I'm not sure how I feel about it. Part of me says the brothers deserve it. Nothing he did to them – accusing them of being spies, holding Simeon until the brothers can produce Benjamin, framing Benjamin for stealing the royal goblet – none of that compares to what they did to him because they were jealous of his coat. And maybe Joseph needed to test his brothers to see if they changed.

But another part of me asks “why?”. What if Joseph had determined the brothers hadn't changed? He was the second most powerful person in Egypt; how could 11 hungry brothers possibly threaten him? It seems like overkill.

I invite you to open to p. 261 of *Etz Hayim*. The brothers have been in Egypt for three days. Joseph has accused them of being spies and demanded they produce Benjamin to demonstrate their honesty. And the brothers are scared: “They said to one another, ‘Alas we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish and paid no heed as he pleaded with us.’” It is perfect irony. Joseph listens to their bickering and doesn't respond, just as they once listened to his pleading and paid no heed.

And then we read in verse 24: “ויסב מעליהם ויבך”, Joseph turned away from them and wept.” Joseph had concocted this plan, but it became too much. This is one of three instances where Joseph is overcome with emotion. When Benjamin is brought to him in chapter 43, we read, “With that, Joseph hurried out, for he was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there.” And then next week, we will read after Judah delivers a moving speech on Benjamin's behalf, “Joseph could no longer control himself before his attendants. ... His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace.” Another sermon could focus on Joseph's alpha-male character traits, which keep him from displaying emotion in public. But here I want to concentrate on the feelings themselves.

One of the features of *Etz Hayim* is that it has two different commentaries. Above the line is the commentary of Nahum Sarna, the renowned 20th century biblical scholar who focuses on linguistics, archaeology, and other scholarly issues. And below the line is a compilation of *midrashic* and homiletical commentary edited by Rabbi Harold Kushner, one of the most gifted pulpit rabbis of the 20th century.

You might say that the commentary above the line serves the head, while the commentary below the line serves the heart. And here we can play the commentaries off each other because they disagree as to the meaning of Joseph's crying.

In the commentary just above the line, we read in verse 24: **“and wept.** Joseph is deeply affected by the genuine contrition he hears in the words of his brothers, but for the present he must conceal his emotions.” In other words, Joseph is justified in his actions. He is like the parent delivering tough love, the judge rendering a verdict – it is hard but there is a purpose to his scheming. Joseph is moved by the brothers' expressions of contrition and remorse, which justify the trouble he is causing them.

But now look below the line, verse 24: **“He turned away from them and wept.** For 20 years, Joseph had dreamed of getting even with his brothers. Now that he has that power, now that his youthful dream of having them bow down to him has come true, Joseph realizes that he does not really want revenge. He wants his family back. Revenge is almost always sweeter in the contemplation than in the realization.” In other words, Joseph is crying because he feels a sense of guilt for the way he is abusing his power to get back at his brothers. Revenge is not as satisfying as he imagined it would be, but he sticks with it for two years. And it causes pain for his brothers, and especially his father who has no idea why he deserves to lose Joseph ... and then Simeon ... and then Benjamin. In this reading, Joseph cries because he feels badly about what he is doing.

We experience a version of Joseph's dilemma on Passover when we recount the plagues God visited upon the Egyptians. On one hand, we experience the moment with glee. The Egyptians deserved it, and the Rabbis play games. It wasn't just 10 plagues in Egypt, but 50 more at the sea. No, It was 40! No! it was 50 plagues in Egypt and 250 at the sea!

But on the other hand, we feel badly. We spill a little wine in recognition of the humanity of even the Egyptian taskmasters. A *midrash* says that when the sea closed, the angels began to sing; and God rebuked them. “My children are drowning in the sea and you are singing praise?!?” We debate. Was it fair for God to harden Pharaoh's heart and then inflict punishment upon him for decisions over which he had no control? Was it right for the Israelites to loot Egyptian gold and silver before departing? On one hand, it was payment for 400 years of slavery; but it is also stealing.

Maybe we're being too soft. Midrash Lekah Tov suggests this is a national trait. Joseph was overcome with emotion, we worry about the poor Egyptian taskmasters, because that's who we are. “מעולם אבותינו רחמנים היו” From the very beginning, our ancestors were filled with mercy.” We understand that revenge isn't that great.

46 years ago, shortly after assuming the presidency, Gerald Ford issued a proclamation granting full pardon for any crimes that might have been committed by President Nixon while he was in office. The new president understood that in America, no person, even the president is above the law. But he worried about the effects of vengeful punishment. In his words, “The prospects of [bringing to trial a former President] will cause prolonged and divisive debate over the propriety of exposing to further punishment and degradation a man who has already paid the unprecedented penalty of relinquishing

the highest elective office of the United States.” The wisdom of that decision is still being debated. I just want to point out the parallels between President Ford’s thought process and Joseph’s tears.

Or take capital punishment. There are legitimate arguments both ways, perhaps to debate in a different forum, but they amount to determining where are the lines between punishment, protection, and revenge. Supporters and opponents alike dare not suppress the feelings of mercy or compassion or doubt that come with the power to mete out the ultimate punishment.

In interpersonal relationships as well. I spoke on Yom Kippur about the difficulties of granting forgiveness. It is understandable to worry that people might take advantage. We may doubt a person’s contrition. Some things are unforgiveable. But we have to be careful lest the instinct for revenge takes over. Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, another gifted rabbi of the 20th-century, warns about our tendency to remember all the things another person may have done to hurt us, while somehow forgetting the instances when we were at fault. “All too often,” he writes, “we remember with bitterness the unfulfilled promises made to us but we calmly forget the pledge we made and did not honor. ... Were it not better that we forget the first and remembered the second?” That is the conclusion Joseph ultimately draws.

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There are times when revenge feels justified, but it comes at a price. And as Joseph learned, we can control ourselves for only so long. Eventually, our natural tendency for mercy, our innate desire to love, our need to restore and return and rebuild must win out. Shabbat shalom.