

Parshat Miketz 5779

Yosef Hatzadik and Teshuva One of the most difficult questions about the sidrot which tell the story of Yosef and his brothers is why Yosef took so long to reveal himself to his brothers. What was Yosef trying to do?

An excellent answer to this question is brought by Rabbi Sacks in his introduction to the Koren Yom Kippur Machzor. Rabbi Sacks starts by looking at Sefer Beraishit as a whole. He says that Genesis tells a troubled story. Gifted with freedom, almost immediately humans betray that gift. Adam and Eve sin. Cain, the first human child, murders Abel his brother. By Genesis 6, the world has become a place of violence and random cruelty, and G-d rejects man. However, Rabbi Sacks notes, "G-d does not forgive the generation of the flood, or the builders of Babel, or the sinners of Sodom. Significantly, when Adam prayed for the people of Sodom he did not ask G-d to forgive them." Rabbi Sacks points out that, "the first time we encounter a clear instance of forgiveness is when Joseph, by now the viceroy of Egypt, finally reveals his identity to his brothers."

Rabbi Sacks continues by suggesting that Yosef did what he did so he could forgive his brothers. Rabbi Sacks points out that the first thing which Yosef does, when as an Egyptian ruler his brothers ask him for food, is to accuse them of being spies. He imprisons them for three days, then holds Shimon hostage and tells the other brothers that they must return home and bring back Binyomin. Rabbi Sacks states that Yosef, "is forcing the brothers to re-enact the earlier occasion when they came back to their father with one of their number, Joseph, missing." The brothers respond to this situation by saying, "Truly we are guilty (avel ashemim anachnu) because of our brother." (Bereishit 42:21). "The brothers," according to Rabbi Sacks, "admit that they have done wrong and demonstrate remorse." (Rabbi Sacks also notes that the words "avel ashemim anachnu" which the brothers say, "reverberate throughout our prayers on Yom Kippur.") The brothers eventually return with Binyomin. However, on their way home, Binyomin is accused of stealing a precious silver cup. Yehuda responds by saying, "G-d has uncovered your

servants' guilt." (Bereishit 44:16). Rabbi Sacks points out that what Yehuda is doing is confessing a sin, which after demonstrating remorse, is the second stage of Teshuva.

Yehuda actually asks to be imprisoned so that Binyomin can return home. Rabbi Sacks points out the parallel. Yehuda, "who had many years earlier sold Joseph as a slave, is now willing to become a slave so that his brother Benjamin can go free." Thus, Yehuda, "demonstrated what the Talmud and Maimonides define as complete repentance, namely when circumstances repeat themselves and you have an opportunity to commit the same offence again, but you refrain from doing so because you have changed." (Yoma 86b; Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva 2:1).

Yosef's behaviour intrigues me in this explanation. What Rabbi Sacks is saying (and the interpretation fits perfectly as a peshat) is that Yosef wasn't taking revenge on his brothers. In fact Yosef tells his brothers (Beraishit 50:19-20), "shall I take G-d's place? You might have meant to do me harm, but G-d made it come out for good." However, Yosef also didn't just passively let his brothers walk away with what they did. What Yosef did was to teach his brothers how to do Teshuva.

I wonder if that is why Yosef is referred to as Yosef Hatzadik. Tzadik, as we know, comes from the word "tzedek" or "justice". This means wanting what is right to happen- not to be walked over but not to be too punitive either. Maybe also Yosef was applying the concept of "areivot" or "kol yisrael araveim ze bazeh" (i.e. that Jews are responsible for each other). Yosef wasn't annoyed with his brothers because of what they did to him. However, he was worried about the sin which they had committed and he wanted to make sure that they did teshuva. It could be that there are lessons here which we could apply to our own lives. For example, how we relate to irreligious Jews or members of society who have fallen into a life of crime.