

Parshat Miketz

Accepting the Blame

When Yosef’s brothers arrive in Egypt to buy provisions during the hunger, Yosef makes things difficult for them and challenges his brothers as being spies. The brothers realize that these troubles are a G-d-given punishment for their misdeeds in selling him. Upon hearing their remorse, Reuven further rebukes them. This Sicha gives a deeper understanding to Reuven’s harsh words, and reveals the tremendous power of true repentance.

This week’s *parsha* continues with the saga of Yosef and his brothers. Yosef has now become the viceroy to Pharaoh in Egypt. A hunger breaks out in the surrounding lands, including the land of Israel, and Yosef’s brothers go down to Egypt to buy food. When they arrive, Yosef recognizes his brothers and accuses them of being spies. They defend their position by explaining that they are not spies, but siblings who have come to buy food and look for their brother.

In order to prove their innocence, Yosef demands that they bring their youngest brother Binyamin to Egypt. Furthermore, he insists that one of the brothers, Shimon, remains in prison in Egypt, to ensure their return with their youngest sibling.

The brothers realize that the troubles that have befallen them must be a punishment from G-d, as a result of their ill-treatment toward Yosef.

Text 1

And they said to one another, "Indeed, we are guilty for our brother, that we witnessed the distress of his soul when he begged us, and we did not listen. That is why this trouble has come upon us."

Bereishis 42:21

The brothers concluded that their current predicament was due to their hard-heartedness toward Yosef. He had begged them to be merciful towards him and they did not heed his cries.

When Reuven, who was not directly involved with the selling of Yosef, heard his brothers admitting to their wrongdoings, he added to their guilt and reprimanded them for the way that they had dealt with him.

He told them that not only were they wrong for being callous against Yosef, but that the decision to sell him was wrong as well.

Text 2

And Reuven answered them, saying, "Didn't I tell you, saying, 'Don't sin against the lad,' but you did not listen. And his blood as well—behold!—is being demanded."

Bereishis 42: 22

Reuven added salt to their wound by attaching a further reason for their guilt: "And his blood as well—behold!—is being demanded," alluding to the additional transgression of selling Yosef.

Curiously, instead of consoling them at the moment of their remorse, Reuven elected to rebuke his brothers even more sternly for the injustices that they had committed.

Reuven's actions seem to make no sense. What can possibly be gained by him expressing these harsh words at this particular time, when his brothers were already remorseful over their actions?

Seemingly, when a person is broken for a misdeed that they have committed, and already has begun to repent for their transgressions, it would be proper to support them—not to further deride them, adding more iniquities to their own list of crimes.

How could Reuven, the eldest of the twelve tribes, conduct himself as such towards his own brothers, and ridicule them even more for their sins?

Possible explanation

To properly understand the conversation between Reuven and his brothers, we must examine the meaning of his brothers' words, and attempt to understand the intent of their terse exchange.

The brothers had said, "Indeed, we are guilty...that is why this trouble has come upon us." Reuven then responded, "Do not sin against the lad."

Each of them were making a point as to the way that one should act when he is faced with distress.

The brothers articulated, that when faced with troubles, a person should realize that all G-d does has a reason. If a person is faced with adversities, it is justified by a wrongdoing that they had committed, as the pain serves to cleanse them of their sin.

Reuven, however, was imparting to them that it was not enough to exclaim that G-d was justified for the way that he was conducting their lives, but they must repent for their actions as well.

Justice and repentance

In the brothers' exclamation, "Indeed, we are guilty...that is why this trouble has come upon us," they expressed a justification of G-d's actions towards them. They realized that all that was happening in Egypt was not by chance, and that they were deserving of all the hardships that they were presently facing, because of the hard-heartedness that they had shown towards Yosef.

They were essentially expressing the same trait of G-d's justness that is expressed by Moshe *Rabeinu*, when he praises the Almighty in the song of Haazinu:

Text 3

The deeds of the [Mighty] Rock are perfect, for all His ways are just; a faithful G-d, without injustice, He is righteous and upright.

Devarim 32:4

The Almighty is perfect and just, faithful, righteous and upright. When a person is faced with hardships, it is not by chance, but as a result of an injustice that they themselves committed. The brothers attested to this justness of G-d, and realized that their actions had warranted this consequence.

Reuven's perspective however, was that though it was proper that the brothers had voiced this recognition, and had accepted the punishment, they had only achieved the first step. He believed that recognizing that G-d's actions were just was not enough. He therefore encouraged them not to be satisfied with this admittance, but to repent as well.

His words, "Didn't I tell you, saying, 'Do not sin against the lad,'" were therefore not meant to

add insult to injury, but on the contrary, his intention was to help his brothers do complete.

Reuven communicated that the hardships a person receives is not just retribution from G-d for a misdeed that he has made, but it should serve as a wakeup call to repent as well.

This idea is aptly expressed by Rambam. He explains, that when troubles happen to a person, he should recognize that they are 1) a result of the person's own actions, and 2) that they serve as a call to remind a person to repent for his ways:

Text 4

This practice is one of the paths of repentance; for when a trouble arises, and the people cry out [to G-d] and sound the trumpets, everyone will realize that [the trouble] occurred because of their evil conduct, as [Yirmiyahu, 5:25] states: "Your sins have turned away [the rains and the harvest climate]." This [realization] will cause the removal of this trouble from upon them.

Rambam, Laws of Fasts 1:2

Ultimately, it is not good enough to realize that the troubles are a punishment from G-d, but a person must realize that he must repent as well. It is the *teshuvah* that will bring about the removal of the troubles from the person's midst. This is what Reuven was telling his brothers— that in order to take away these hardships, they must atone for the way they had acted towards Yosef.

Once Reuven was inspiring his brothers to properly repent for their sins, he specified which actions these were, in order for their *teshuvah* to be a complete one.

He therefore informed them that they needed to also be remorseful for the act of selling Yosef— not only for their lack of pity toward him.

The difficulty

There is, however, a difficulty with the above elucidation. According to what was explained regarding Reuven's intention to help his brothers, there seem to be additional words in Reuven's exchange, which don't seem to fit with the tone of helping them repent.

Reuven says, "Didn't I tell you, saying, 'Do not sin against the lad.'" He does not only inform them that they had sinned, but he adds as well, "*didn't I tell you.*" This does not seem to teach his brothers anything. It merely appears to be a declaration that he had been right all along.

It seems inconceivable, that at a time of shame for his brothers, Reuven would praise *himself* by contrasting his righteousness with theirs.

Based on the above difficulty, it is clear that in Reuven's words there must be another meaning, which sheds light on this seemingly harsh statement.

A path to repentance

It was explained previously that the brothers' declaration, "Indeed, we are guilty for our brother," was not a statement of repentance, but a declaration that G-d was just in the way that he punished them. It was further explained that Reuven's statement, "Didn't I tell you, saying, 'Do not sin against the lad,'" was informing them that they must repent as well.

It is plausible to explain however, that in fact, by the brothers' above declaration, they were not only recognizing the Almighty's just actions, but they *were* doing *teshuvah* as well. By the brothers' utterance, "Indeed, we are guilty," they were admitting guilt, and repenting for the way that they had acted.

These words do not only express that G-d is justified in punishing them, but it is primarily a declaration of their *own* faults, and was thus an act of repentance.

Reuven, too, was educating them regarding the path to true repentance. Once he observed that they sincerely wished to repent, he wanted to guide them as to the proper method of doing so.

In his statement, "Didn't I tell you, saying, 'Do not sin against the lad,' but you did not listen," he was placing the blame on *them*. This too, was to teach them to properly repent.

When a person accepts that it is their fault, they are truly ready to do *teshuvah*. For, as long as a person does not accept the fact that they are responsible for their actions, they have no reason to repent.

In this light, Reuven was not accentuating their sin, or saying that he had been right all along, but on the contrary, he was merely helping them do *teshuvah* in a complete way, by showing them their blame.

Free choice

The idea that man has free choice to choose on his own volition, all his actions, and the concept of repentance, are intrinsically linked. In order for repentance to be possible, a person must have free choice over the actions that they choose to do.

In the Laws of *Teshuvah*, Rambam inserts an explanation regarding the concept of free choice, as it relates to repentance. He states the following:

Text 5

Free will is granted to all men. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his...Therefore, it is proper for a person to cry and mourn for his sins and for what he has done to his soul, the evil consequences, he brought upon it. This is implied by the following verse¹: "Of what should a living man be aggrieved? [A man of his sins.]" [The prophet] continues explaining, since free choice is in our hands and our own decision [is what prompts us to] commit all these wrongs, it is proper for us to repent and abandon our wickedness, for this choice is presently in our hand. This is implied by the following verse²: "Let us search and examine our ways and return [to G-d]."

Rambam, Laws of Teshuvah 5:1-2

Although free choice is an important axiom concerning all of the Torah, Rambam chooses to explain it at length, specifically within the laws of *teshuvah* because of its particular importance concerning *teshuvah*.

This is because the entire idea of *teshuvah* is not possible without choice.

Concerning other commandments, even if there would be no concept of choice, a person would be able to do the commandment, albeit without freewill.

(*Without* choice, it is impossible that the commandment be a *commandment*. By very definition, a commandment is something that the person does *on his own* because he was directed to do so. If there is no concept of free choice, there cannot be a *command* and there

¹ Eicha 3:39.

² Ibid, 3:40.

cannot be reward or punishment—however, the actual *act* is possible.)

This is not so in regard to the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*. For a person to repent, they must *feel* guilt and remorse for their actions, and decide that they no longer desire to act in this evil manner. Without free choice, there can be no regret and remorse for the actions that they have done, and there can be no decision to rectify them in the future. Without free choice, the very concept of repentance makes no sense.

In addition to this correlation between repentance and free choice, there is as well, a deeper connection between the two ideas, which Rambam alludes to by explaining the concept of choice in the chapters of *teshuvah*.

It is this deeper correlation between the two subjects that Reuven was imparting to his brothers in his statement of, “Didn't I tell you, saying, ‘Don't sin against the lad,’ but you did not listen. And his blood as well—behold!—is being demanded.”

True *teshuvah*

True *teshuvah* is when a person completely returns to G-d, with their full heart. This occurs when a person repents from their wrong-doing completely on their own volition, without any external cause motivating them.

If there is an outside force that is driving the individual or coercing them, then it is not *they* who are doing the *teshuvah*, but the situation in which they find themselves. It cannot truly be said that *they* are returning to G-d, as something pushed them to repent.

In such a case, the *teshuvah* has not permeated the person in a real way, and it is not coming from *his* heart.

Rambam explains, that for a person do to true *teshuvah*, it needs to come completely from within himself and be done without any coercion whatsoever. In his words:

Text 6

What constitutes *teshuvah*? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again, as the verse³ states: "May the wicked abandon his ways...." Similarly, he must regret the past, as the verse⁴ states: "After I returned, I regretted." [He must reach the level where] He who knows the hidden will testify concerning him that he will never return to this sin again.

Rambam, Laws of Teshuvah 2:2

For a person to do *teshuvah*, it must be in a way that “[He must reach the level where] He who knows the hidden will testify concerning him that he will never return to this sin again.” He cannot merely repent because he no longer has strength to sin, or that he is scared of retribution. It must be that at his very essence he has become a person who no longer wishes to act against the Almighty's will.

This is the correlation between the concept of free will and repentance—for *teshuvah* can only come through free choice. It must be that the person himself is motivated purely by an intent to return to G-d, and not only to save himself from divine retribution.

This is, therefore, the meaning of Reuven's message to his brothers.

When his brothers had acknowledged that they were responsible for the disturbing

³ Yeshaya 55:7.

⁴ Yirmiyah 31:18.

circumstances which befell them, and began to repent for their sin, Reuven advised them to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* in its most complete form.

The brothers had said, "Indeed, we are guilty for our brother...that is why this trouble has come upon us." They repented, but only because they were now being punished. Reuven was instructing them to return to the Almighty with *authentic teshuvah*. He therefore told them, "Didn't I tell you, saying, 'Do not sin against the lad,' but you did not listen." He explained to them that they should not do *teshuvah* because *now* they were facing punishment, they should rather do *teshuvah* because the act had been wrong from the onset.

This is why Reuven chose to express, "And his blood as well—behold!—is being demanded," hinting that these troubles which were coming now, on account of the wrong-doings to Yosef, were an *additional* matter. This was only an "and." The reason that they should do *teshuvah*, is not because they were being *punished*, but because they had *sinned*. True *teshuvah* cannot be a response to consequences, it must be an end to itself.

Accepting responsibility

What still must be explained is why Reuven chose to say "Didn't I tell you... *but you did not listen?*" Why did Reuven need to stress their failure to follow his instructions not to sell Yosef, and they did not listen to him?

This can be understood through explaining a similar statement by Rambam, in his explanation as to why a person must repent for their actions and the correlation between free choice and repentance he makes the following remark:

Text 7

Since free choice is in our hands and our own decision [is what prompts us to] commit all these wrongs, it is proper for us to repent and abandon our wickedness, for this choice is presently in our hand. This is implied by the following verse⁵: "Let us search and examine our ways and return [to G-d]."

Rambam, Laws of Teshuvah 5:2

Rambam explains that it is because the person had free choice in choosing to do evil, and that they did the evil through their own decision, that they should therefore repent for their sins.

In order for a person to do *teshuvah*, they must completely accept responsibility for their actions.

All too often, people tend to attribute their faults to an outside influence which caused them to sin—a difficult situation they were in, a specific incident that happened to them, etc. They thus shirk some of the responsibility and do not fully repent.

Because the person believes that they are not completely responsible for their faults, they can never truly repent, as they have not yet accepted responsibility for their actions.

It is for this reason that a person is always responsible for their actions, no matter how difficult the challenge that they are facing is. For, no matter how difficult the challenge, the person is equipped with the tools to overcome his challenge.

When a person is truly honest with themselves, they will realize that it is their own decision that led them to sin. When a person has that

⁵ *Ibid*, 3:40.

realization, it is then that they are able to truly repent.

This is why Reuven adds, “Didn't I tell you...but you did not listen.”

He was explaining to his brothers, that for them to properly do *teshuvah* it was necessary that it be accompanied by taking full responsibility for what they had done. If not, then their *teshuvah* could not be complete.

They needed to clearly recognize that their misdeeds were their own choices. Only when they accepted complete responsibility for their actions, did it become possible for them to repent for doing them.

The inner dimension

As explained, the concept of free choice and *teshuvah* are intrinsically connected. Free choice is expressive of a person's tremendous connection with G-d. So too, *teshuvah* brings out this essential connection with G-d as well.

Text 8

And the Lord G-d said, “Behold man has become like the Unique One among us, knowing good and bad: and now lest he put forth his hand and take also of the Tree of Life, and eat and live forever.

Bereishis 3:22

This verse expresses that by man possessing free choice, he is similar to G-d. Chassidus⁶ explains that man's free choice is derived because he has a soul within him which is united with G-d⁷.

Just as G-d has total control to act as He wishes, with nothing stopping him, in a similar vein, so

too, does a Jew have the ability to act as he desires—whether those actions are positive or otherwise.

The ultimate concept of choice to do what he wants, with nothing standing in his way, is expressed when a person does *teshuvah*.

When a person sins, they separate themselves from all matters of holiness, and separate themselves from G-d. Once they are separated from G-d, it should be impossible to come close to him and repent for his actions.

This though, is the power of *teshuvah*. Since a person possesses free choice, which is essentially to act as he pleases, without anything standing in his way, he is able to make a new connection with G-d and choose to be a completely new person from who he was when he sinned.

The idea of free choice is the connection that he has with the Almighty, which makes it possible to return to G-d, no matter how distant he has become.

Chanukah's light

Parshat Mikeitz always occurs during the holiday of Chanukah. Just as this *parsha* expresses the manner with which a person can do *teshuvah*, so too, Chanukah as well expresses the idea of *teshuvah*.

On Chanukah we increase in light, adding a candle every one of the eight days. In Mishlei, King Shlomo compares Torah and *mitzvos* to the idea of light.

⁶ Likutei Torah, Emor 38b.

⁷ Tanya Ch. 2.

Text 9

For a *mitzvah* is a lamp and the Torah is light; and reproving discipline is the way of life.

Mishlei 6:23

Reproving discipline, which is *teshuvah*, is a “way of life.” For when a person does *teshuvah*, they connect with the source of all life—G-d himself.

During the time of Chanukah, the Jews were living in a dark era. The Greeks forbade them from living a Torah way of life, and the *Beis Hamikdash* was defiled. This oppression brought about the situation where a band of faithful Jews fought to defend the glory of the Almighty G-d.

Just like *teshuvah* transforms a dark situation into light, so too during Chanukah, the Jewish people brought a new light into the world after the darkness that was brought on by the Greeks.

May we take the strength that Chanukah radiates, ignite this most inner layer of our souls, and through our own free choice, connect to G-d on the deepest of levels in transforming darkness into light!

(Based on Likutei Sichos 30, Mikeitz 2, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel.

To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: www.Neirot.com.)