

Parashat Vayechi, 5773, 2012:

“*Am I instead of G-d?*”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

This week’s *parasha* (Torah portion) contains a verse that seems to defy all manner of understanding: “Now Joseph's brothers saw that their father had died...” (*Sefer Bereishit* 50:15, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). What can the Torah possibly mean when it tells us this? After all, the preceding two verses unequivocally state:

And his [Yaakov’s] sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and they buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah, which field Abraham had bought for burial property from Ephron the Hittite before Mamre. And Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers, and all who had gone up with him to bury his father, after he had buried his father. (Ibid. 13-14)

Rashi (1040-1105) answers our question by quoting a Midrashic explanation that suggests that the brothers perceived Yosef’s behavior as being different than it had been when their father was alive:

Now Joseph’s brothers saw that their father had died: What does it mean that they saw? They recognized his (Jacob’s) death in Joseph, for they were accustomed to dine at Joseph’s table, and he was friendly toward them out of respect for his father, but as soon as Jacob died, he was no longer friendly toward them. — [From *Targum Jonathan ben Uzziel; Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Sefer Shemot* 2]

Another statement, this time from the standard edition of the *Midrash Tanchuma*, seems to indicate that the brothers began to worry about how Yosef would treat them almost immediately after they buried their beloved father:

Now Joseph's brothers saw that their father had died: What did they see now that caused them to have such visceral fear? But in fact, they saw at the time that they returned from their father's burial that Yosef went to make a blessing [for his salvation] over the very same pit into which his brothers had tossed him.... Once they saw this, they said: "Now that our father has died, perhaps Yosef will bear a grudge and surely repay us in kind for all the evil that we did to him." (*Vayechi* 17)

When the above-stated *Midrashim* are viewed in tandem, it becomes clear that Yosef's brothers had legitimate reasons to fear a potential outpouring of pent-up anger and rage. Yet, Yosef did no such thing. The reason, I believe, is that Yosef had conquered his desire for revenge because he had reached a high level of moral rectitude. This notion is encapsulated in the honorific title by which he has been known throughout Jewish history: "*Yosef Hatzaddik*" ("Yosef the Righteous"). It appears, however, that the brothers did not fully comprehend Yosef's true moral stature and judged him, perhaps, in the same manner in which they would have judged themselves. In fact, they so misunderstood Yosef's nature that they offered themselves to him to be his slaves: "His brothers also went and fell before him, and they said, 'Behold, we are your slaves.'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 50:18) Yosef, of course, desired no such debasement of his brothers. Moreover, he did everything in his power to assuage their fears, and to assure them of his continuing protection and physical support:

But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid, for am I instead of G-d? Indeed, you intended evil against me, [but] G-d designed it for good, in order to bring about what is at present to keep a great populace alive. So now do not fear. I will sustain you and your small children." And he comforted them and spoke to their hearts. (*Ibid.* 19-21)

This passage contains the particularly fascinating phrase of "for am I instead of G-d?" This is not the first time we encounter this expression in *Sefer Bereishit*. It also appears in the midst of the heartbreaking dialogue that ensued between Yosef's then-barren mother Rachel, and his father Yaakov:

And Rachel saw that she had not borne [any children] to Jacob, and Rachel envied her sister, and she said to Jacob, “Give me children, and if not, I am dead.” And Jacob became angry with Rachel, and he said, “Am I instead of G-d, Who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (Ibid. 30:1-2)

Even a cursory reading of the two passages reveals that although Yaakov and Yosef used the same words, they meant something quite different. Yaakov angrily and insensitively berated Rachel with the words “Am I instead of G-d?” whereas Yosef used them to comfort and reassure his frightened and trembling brothers. *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory) alluded to this fundamental difference in *Midrash Tanchuma Buber*, Parashat Vayatzte 19:

Rachel said to Yaakov: “Give me children, and if not, I am dead.” And Jacob became angry with Rachel. And the Holy Spirit (*Ruach Hakodesh*) then said: “Shall a wise man raise his voice with opinions of wind...” [i.e. meaningless words and causeless anger (Rashi) *Sefer Iyov* 15:2] Yaakov then said to Rachel: “Am I the vice-regent (*antikyasar*) of the Holy One Blessed be He? Am I instead of G-d?” [In response to Yaakov’s gross insensitivity to Rachel] *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) took an oath and swore: “In the same language that you [Yaakov] angrily said, ‘Am I instead of G-d?’ shall her [Rachel’s] son arise [and state from a position of strength and sensitivity] to your other sons: “Am I instead of G-d?”

The noted Israeli Bible scholar, Professor Nechama Leibowitz *zatzal* (1905-1997), presented the crystal clear difference between Yaakov and Yosef in their use of the same phraseology, in the following insightful analysis:

Jacob had shirked responsibility in these words, rejecting his wife’s Rachel’s request to pray for her in time of trouble and share her distress, on the grounds of man’s incompetence and his limitations in the matter concerned. He had adopted this pose of humbleness and inadequacy in order to absolve himself of all responsibility. Joseph, on the other hand, uttered this expression of inadequacy and self-abasement in order to save his brothers’ feelings and reassure them. It was not for him to judge them; the judgment was G-d’s. (Studies in the Book of Genesis: *In the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary*, translated by Aryeh Newman, p.560)

Based on these sources, it appears to me that we can learn something essential from both Yaakov's and Yosef's reactions and subsequent actions. Yaakov taught us precisely how we ought not to behave. Rather than demonstrating insensitivity and abnegating responsibility to our spouses, we need to recognize their pain and take on their emotional burdens as if they are truly our own. After all, according to the *Midrash*, G-d Himself soundly rejected Yaakov's behavior toward his suffering wife in no uncertain terms.

In stark contrast, I believe that Yosef taught us how to "take the high road," in order to protect another's feelings at his/her moment of greatest weakness. Perhaps most importantly, we must remember that it is not our role to judge another. Thus, each of us should try to emulate Yosef and declare in heartfelt humility: "Am I instead of G-d?" May Hashem grant us the wisdom and understanding to walk humbly before Him, and before all mankind. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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