

Parshas Vayechi 5772

A MATTER OF MECHILAH (FORGIVENESS)

One of the many great kindnesses Hashem has bestowed upon us is the opportunity He provides to rectify misdeeds. “It’s never too late” is a guiding principle, and even one who has stumbled upon the path of sin may still repent and gain atonement.

However, the situation becomes somewhat more involved when a sin is committed against one’s fellow man. The Mishnah in Yoma (8:9) addresses this point:

עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבִּין אָדָם לְמִקּוֹם, יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר. עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבִּין אָדָם לְחֵבֵרוֹ, אֵין יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, עַד שֶׁיִּכְרַח אֶת חֵבֵרוֹ.

“With regard to sins committed (solely) against Hashem (e.g., eating non-kosher food) – atonement is effected through Yom Kippur. With regard to sins committed against one’s fellow man (e.g., insults, evil gossip) – Yom Kippur cannot effect an atonement unless the offender has first appeased the injured party.”

It cannot be overemphasized just how crucial it is to obtain the forgiveness of one’s fellow. Failure to do so can be quite a serious matter; in fact, the consequences can be catastrophic. Perhaps nothing bears out this point better than the comments of Rabbeinu Bechaye on an episode in this week’s *parshah*.

TEN FOR TEN

In the aftermath of the passing of the patriarch Ya’akov, the brothers feared that Yosef might take the opportunity to “settle some scores” over his ordeal. They sent a message to Yosef, claiming in the name of their father that he

should forgive them, and they personally appeared before him, petitioning for mercy and prostrating themselves. Yosef was moved by their appeal and sought to reassure them:

“And Yosef said to them: ‘Do not be afraid... while you may have had malicious designs against me, Hashem intended for benefit... so that a great nation shall be kept alive... Do not fear; I will support you and your children.’ And he comforted them, and spoke to their heart” (*Bereishis 50:19-21*).

Yosef’s response is particularly instructive when we consider what was omitted. The brothers brought their petition for grace, and Yosef responded with compassion. However, nowhere in Yosef’s reply do we find explicit mention that he actually *forgave* them for their transgression. Apparently, this omission was to prove quite costly.

Securing forgiveness – as we have seen from the Mishnah – is a prerequisite for atonement. As the brothers came up short in securing Yosef’s forgiveness, they eventually died with their sin still not rectified. In fact – the Rabbeinu Bechaye tells us – it was not until a later era that the misdeed was expiated. Many are familiar with the heart-wrenching episode of the *Asarah Harugei Malchus* (The Ten Martyrs). Their story is recounted twice a year, amidst the tearful prayers and liturgy of the Yom Kippur and Tisha B’av services. Ten outstanding and righteous sages – R’ Akiva, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, and others – were subjected to brutal torture and execution. The tragic demise of these ten figures served as the atonement for the act of their ancestors, the ten brothers who participated in the sale of Yosef.

(It could be that even this was not the end of the after-

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shocks of the transgression. R' Elchonon Wasserman [*Kovetz Ma'amarim*] posits that the infamous blood libels from which the Jewish people suffered for centuries were retribution for the brothers' attempt to hide their crime by dipping Yosef's coat in goat's blood.)

ACTUAL (AND NOT VIRTUAL) MECHILAH

The above illustrates the urgent need to effectuate *mechilah* on the part of the offended. An effort and desire to secure such *mechilah* – while certainly praiseworthy – may not be sufficient; real *mechilah* must be achieved.

One real-life manifestation of this idea occurred recently within the confines of a certain girls' school. One of the students unfortunately suffered from a condition that affected her mental stability. While her more mature peers sympathized with her plight, there was a group of morally

deficient individuals who reacted to the girl's antics with scorn and taunting. The treatment the poor girl received at the hands of these classmates only served to exacerbate her condition. Ultimately, she broke down and was confined to an institution.

It was at this point that the unthinking girls "woke up," as the results of their "daily entertainment" now stared them in the face. They finally felt real remorse and wished to beg *mechilah* from their stricken victim. Only now, she was classified as a *shoteh*, one incapable of cogent thought and communication (and thus unable to supply bona fide *mechilah*).

The case was referred to R' Chaim Kanievsky, and he ruled that – unfortunately – there was no recourse at the moment. Just as with Yosef's brothers, the fact that they felt regret and even took steps to obtain Yosef's forgiveness was not enough to erase the sin. Only by securing an explicit statement of *mechilah* would the transgression be erased. Short of this, they still bore the sin and its consequences. So, too, the sin of taunting and harming their classmate would only be properly redressed by securing her actual *mechilah* – something impossible under the current circumstances. He directed the girls to pray for their victim's speedy and complete recovery; with her wits restored, she would then be able to offer meaningful *mechilah*.

Obviously, the above should serve as another impetus to engender caution in our interpersonal dealings. With the proper care and restraint, we will hopefully be able to avoid such hair-raising scenarios, where both the offender and the offended are effectively stuck, mired in the consequences of interpersonal sins.

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