

## This Week's Parshah - Parshas Vayeishev

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Frayda *bas* Harry *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

### Origin of the Blood Libel

This week's *parshah* relates the episode of the struggle between Yosef and his brothers, leading to *mechiras* Yosef (the selling of Yosef into slavery) at his brothers' hands. To prevent their father Ya'akov from identifying them as the party responsible for the disappearance of his most beloved son, they arranged for matters to appear differently: "And they took Yosef's *kesones* (tunic)... and they dipped the tunic in (goat's) blood... They brought it to their father... and they said, '... Is this your son's tunic?' He recognized it, and said, 'This is my son's tunic; a vicious beast has devoured him. Yosef has been torn asunder!'" (*Bereishis* 37:32,33).

As is well known, the ramifications of this act were astounding. With Yosef en route to Mitzrayim, the whole chain of events leading to the eventual Exodus from Egypt and the emergence of Klal Yisrael as a Torah nation was set in motion. But the deed also carried some grievous consequences, effects which – as we shall see – linger to this very day.

### Atonement – in Installments

Many are familiar with Rashi's comments (*Shemos* 32:34) about the enduring effects of the *Cheit Ha'eigel* (Sin of the Golden Calf). Whenever punishment is visited upon Yisrael, a measure of severity is added to achieve yet another degree of atonement for this national sin. Somewhat less known is the fact that this is not the only sin on whose account the Jewish people still suffer.

This is apparent from the Yom Kippur Temple service. An important detail about the garments worn by the officiating Kohen Gadol (High Priest) is recorded in the Mishnah (*Yoma* 3:7):

בַּשְּׁחַר הָיָה לוֹבֵשׁ שָׁל שְׂמוֹנֶה עָשָׂר מָנֶה, וּבֵין הָעֶרְבִים שָׁל שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מָנֶה.

"In the morning, he wore garments worth eighteen *maneh*; in the afternoon, of twelve *maneh*."

The reason the garments worn for the morning service were of superior quality (and hence more expensive) than the set used in the afternoon is because it was in the morning that the chief atonement rituals took place (*Rashi, Yoma* 35b). To be sure, it was actually one specific garment that was "upgraded" for the morning service: the Rambam (*Hilchos Klei Hamikdash*, 8:3) identifies it as none other than the *kesones* (priestly tunic).

Why such emphasis on this particular garment, that it should figure so prominently in the atonement ceremony? The *Meshech Chachmah* (*Acharei Mos*) states that the use of the priestly tunic at this time serves to atone for that long-ago sin, also involving a tunic – that is, the selling of Yosef (who was stripped by his brothers of his *kesones*). He cites the Gemara in *Zevachim* (86b), which states that the *kesones* secures special atonement for the sin of *shefichas damim* (murder – literally, 'spilling of blood'). As proof, the Gemara quotes the *passuk* from our *parshah*: "And they dipped (Yosef's) *kesones* in the blood." A *kesones* atoning for a *kesones*.

Thus we see that every year, a significant component of the Yom Kippur service was conducted specifically to

atone for the sin of *mechiras* Yosef. Apparently, this was a very necessary step, for – in a fashion reminiscent of the *Cheit Ha'eigel* – the specter of this sin, as well, hangs over Klal Yisrael in every generation (*cf. Midrash Mishlei, § 1*).

## Dangerous Irony

R' Elchanan Wasserman, *hy" d*, (*Kovetz Ma'amarim*) goes one step further in revealing the enduring consequences of this deed. He focused on the bizarre phenomenon known as the “blood libel,” which all too often would raise its ugly head. The gentiles would claim that Jews had abducted and killed a non-Jewish child to use his blood in the baking of matzos (an accusation that was once again raised by some Palestinian official approximately a month prior to this writing). Over the course of Jewish history, this claim was raised – with often tragic results. Much Jewish blood was spilled in retaliation for this alleged crime.

From where did this surface? Such nonsensical accusations, which nonetheless led to great persecution! R' Elchanan posited that this was Divinely orchestrated, an act of Divine retribution for the sin of *mechiras* Yosef.

What seems difficult to understand is how this conforms to the notion of *middah keneged middah* (measure for measure). In what way does the punishment relate to the crime? On the surface, of course, the two revolve around the spilling of blood (“And they dipped the *kesones* in blood...”). Perhaps, however, the connection can be understood on a somewhat deeper level.

R' Moshe Shternbuch (*Ta'am V'da'as*) raises an interesting point: The brothers kept the true fate of Yosef from their father. But why did they attribute his disappearance to a wild animal? Why not report a much more common (and hence more plausible) cause, such as attack from bandits?

R' Shternbuch explains that they actually sought to spare their father further pain. Ya'akov had sent his son on a mission (to check on his brothers) from which he never returned. According to the *halachah* (*Magen Avraham § 603*), the sender in such a scenario bears a measure of culpability, and must therefore seek atonement. But this holds true only if the messenger died of a somewhat common cause; had his death come about through unusual means, no atonement is necessary. That is why the brothers did not select a more common cause; this way Ya'akov would not hold himself responsible and undertake a rigorous and painful process of penitence.

While well-intentioned, the irony is glaring. They didn't want their father to suffer; they even risked getting caught to spare him trouble. So why did they kidnap his most beloved son?

Perhaps this might account for the *middah keneged middah* aspect of the blood libel, for the form of the punishment is just as ironic. Among the narratives of the horrors of the Holocaust, we find that the Nazis, *yimach shemam*, would sometimes couch their terror in “humanitarian” terms. On some occasions, they would select the town *shochet* (butcher) as the first target of their persecutions. They would claim that his method of dispatching chickens was cruel and barbaric. Standing up for the chickens' welfare, they proceeded to murder the man in cold blood.

The blood libel also shared this ironic element. Those who raised the prospect were obviously so concerned for the supposed victims. So they responded with an outpouring of violence against untold innocent Jewish men, women, and children – may Hashem avenge their blood.