

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Chayim Yosef *ben* Mechel *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Eye to the Future

PARSHAS VAYEISHEV 5778

This week’s *parshah* contains the gripping and well-known account involving the rivalry between Yosef and his brothers. It almost goes without saying that looking at this episode in a purely superficial manner would constitute a gross error. One may come away with the false impression that this is a tale of petty jealousy, vengeful behavior, and sinister plots. But as we are discussing the “*Shivtei Kah* – G-dly Tribes,” children of the Avos (Patriarchs) and exalted leaders of Klal Yisrael, we know that something much more profound is involved here, as befitting these righteous figures.

And so the obvious question is – what? Is there some way – even on a basic level – that we can gain some insight into the seemingly disturbing conduct displayed by this most holy family? What could really account for the abduction, near-murder, and ultimate dispatch into slavery of a seemingly innocent son of Ya’akov?

As may be expected, many of the commentators advance their explanations to clarify this intriguing episode. What follows is but one selection of many and represents the tip of the iceberg. Thus we shall see, *b’ezras Hashem*, how R’ Yehonasan Eibshutz (*Tiferes Yehonasan*) sheds light on this mystifying subject.

Dangerous Descendent

Far from simple jealousy over status and dreams, R’ Yehonasan reveals that at the root of the brothers’ actions lies their prophetic vision. He understands the *passuk* as intimating this idea when it states: **וַיֵּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרֶחֶק וַיְבַטְרוּם וַיִּקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְנַכְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ** – “**And they saw him from afar**, and before he approached them, they plotted to kill him” (*Bereishis 37:18*). That is, they peered far into the future and discovered the colossal harm Yosef’s offspring would wreak on the Jewish people.

Specifically, it was the personage of Yeravam ben Nevat, a descendant of Yosef who would divide the Kingdom of Yisrael, who was the focus of their attention. Yeravam was to become notorious for introducing idol-worship into his kingdom to prevent his subjects from visiting the Beis Hamikdash, which was located in the rival kingdom of Yehudah. As such, he is characterized by Chazal in the harshest of terms, highlighting the spiritual devastation he inflicted on the nation. As the Mishnah states (*Avos 5:18*):

יָרְבְּעָם חָטָא וְהַחֲטִי'א אֶת הָרַבִּים, חָטָא הָרַבִּים תְּלוּי בּוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר עַל חַטֹּאוֹת יָרְבְּעָם אֲשֶׁר חָטָא וְאֲשֶׁר הִחֲטִי'א אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל.

“Yeravam sinned and caused the masses to sin; (as such,) the sin of the masses is attributed to him. As it states (*Melachim I 15:30*): ‘On account of the sins of Yeravam, who sinned and caused Yisrael to sin’.”

In any event, it was this vision, which “they saw from afar,” that led the brothers to “plot to kill him.” They sincerely hoped to stave off the grave spiritual decline that threatened Yisrael’s future.

The narrative continues: ... וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו... עַתָּה לְכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ וְנִשְׁלַכְהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת... – “And they said to each other: ‘... Now, let us go and kill him, and cast him into one of the pits...’”

(*Bereishis 37:19*). Now, this phrase – “*Va’yomru ish el achiv*” – translates literally as: “The man said to his companion.” And, indeed, the Targum Yonasan learns that the plot was conceived by two people, which he identifies as Shimon and Levi.

R’ Yehonasan Eibshutz sees this development as reinforcing his approach to the episode. For interestingly enough, these were the tribes in the time of Yeravam who defied his directives. That is, they remained loyal to the Beis Hamikdash, visiting it during the pilgrimage festivals. (Levi simply defied him, travelling from all areas of the Land to enter Yerushalayim. A significant section of the Tribe of Shimon actually resided in the portion of Yehudah, and thus they were able to travel unhindered to the Beis Hamikdash.) In any event, as these tribes were the principal opponents of Yeravam and his nefarious policies, it was their progenitors who took the lead role in the attempt to thwart his evil from sprouting in the first place.

Example of Yishmael

Given the rationale outlined above, the question then arises as to why they didn’t go through with their plan. After all, the calculation seems to be rooted in real and legitimate concerns; why, then, did they not take the drastic steps they had discussed?

We can gain insight into this matter from what ultimately did transpire. As the Torah relates further, it was Yehudah who effectively spared Yosef’s life: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה אֶל־אָחָיו מִהַבְצֵעַ כִּי נִהְרַג אֶת־אָחִינוּ... לָכוּ וְנִמְכְּרֵנוּ לְיִשְׁמָעֵאֵלִים וְנִדְנוּ אֶל־תְּהִיבוֹ... וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִרְהַבּוֹר וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף לְיִשְׁמָעֵאֵלִים... – “And Yehudah said to his brothers: ‘What profit shall there be if we would kill our brother... Let us go and sell him to the Yishmaelites, rather than sending our hand against him... And Yosef was lifted from the pit, and they sold Yosef to the Yishmaelites...’” (*Ibid.* v. 26-28).

R’ Yehonasan perceives this development as the key to understanding the brothers’ final decision to reverse course and (at least) refrain from execution. The significant factor here is the involvement of Yishmael. Yishmael himself was featured in a much earlier narrative, in which he and his mother had been banished to wander in the desert. When Hagar and Yishmael were faced with the danger of death from starvation and thirst, the angel appeared to Hagar to reassure her that Hashem had taken pity on her son: אֶל־תִּירְאִי כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶל־קוֹל: הַנֶּעַר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־שָׁם – “Do not fear; for G-d has heard the voice of the lad **in that where he is**” (*Ibid.* 21:17). Commenting on this curious phrase, Rashi reveals the Celestial deliberations that took place regarding Yishmael’s fate. Some of the Heavenly Host argued against the salvation of Yishmael, given the great harm his nation would eventually inflict upon Yisrael. However, Hashem deemed that Yishmael deserved to be saved in spite of what the future held. At the current moment Yishmael was free of guilt; as such, Hashem declared, he was to be judged “*ba’asher hu sham*” – in accordance with the way he was right then. And based on the present, he deserved to be spared.

This was Yehudah’s true intent. In pointing to the Yishmaelites, he was invoking the eternal principal of “*ba’asher hu sham*,” reminding the brothers that Yosef’s ultimate judgment must be based on his present actions and not on the potential tragedies of the future.

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