BS”D

Parshas Vayechi

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*Even though none of us can compare to the original tribes, nevertheless each one of us has a unique purpose and a unique mission.*

The Reconciliation of Yosef and His Brothers

After Yaakov’s death, Yosef’s brothers are afraid that he will take revenge against them. So they sent a message to Yosef claiming that their father had left a message for Yosef to forgive the sin of the brothers against him. They concluded their missive with their own words, “Now please forgive the sin of the servants of the G-d of your father.” (Breishis 50:17)

Yosef responded by telling his brothers not to be afraid. “Am I in the place of G-d? You intended to do bad to me, but G-d intended it for the good.” (Ibid 50:19, 20) The Torah concludes this incident with the words, “He comforted them and spoke to their hearts.” (Ibid 50:21)

What do the brothers mean by referring to themselves as “the servants of the G-d of your father”? What does Yosef mean when he says, “Am I in the place of G-d?” and what does he mean by stating that his brothers “intended bad but G-d intended it for the good”?

The Sforno explains that the brothers sold Yosef because they felt threatened. They thought that Yosef was trying to undermine them in the eyes of their father Yaakov so that they would be rejected from forming the people of Israel and that that role would belong solely to Yosef. “You intended to do bad” should be translated to “You thought that *my* actions were for the bad.” But of course the brothers were mistaken as Yosef had not intended “bad” at all. Their sin in wanting to kill Yosef was a mistake rather than a willful sin as they acted in what they perceived as self-defense. But “G-d intended it for the good.” Your mistaken act in selling me, said Yosef, was turned by G-d into something good. Eventually I became viceroy in Egypt and saved you and many others from starvation. Therefore am I in the place of G-d? How can I argue with G-d’s intention and harm you? Although mistaken in your suspicions, ultimately you were carrying out G-d’s plan.

The Malbim carries this interpretation further. Since the brothers sold Yosef because of their mistaken fears and since it was G-d’s plan, the brothers refer themselves in their plea to Yosef as the servants of the G-d of their fathers. They are saying in effect that they were acting as G-d’s servants when they sold Yosef rather than with their own free will. Unbeknownst to them, they were carrying out G-d’s will.

Yosef accepts their reasoning. “Am I in the place of G-d?” I see that it was G-d’s will that you were doing. Even though your intentions were bad, but G-d’s secret agenda was good, so how could I possibly want to punish you!

The Akeidas Yitzchak takes an almost opposite approach in understanding these passages.

Indeed, by calling themselves the servants of G-d, the brothers were intimating that what they did was G-d’s will. But Yosef rejected this claim. “Am I in the place of G-d?” G-d has His plans to be sure, but that’s no excuse for your behavior. “You intended bad.” Your bad intentions and bad deeds are inexcusable despite the fact that G-d brought good out of it. You acted out of your free will and you are absolutely responsible. G-d has His plans, but man is not in G-d’s place. There is no justification for doing a bad deed.

That being said, Yosef went on to say not to fear his wrath. He would continue to treat them well, sustaining them and their children. The incident ends with the Torah’s words, “He comforted them and spoke to their hearts.” They needed to be comforted, for Yosef had not accepted their excuse. Therefore, he reassured them and made it clear that he would not take revenge.

The two approaches of the Malbim and the Akeidas Yitzchak are different responses to a question that arises many times in Biblical stories. G-d has a certain plan. It needs to be carried out by man. Is the man who acts and in effect carries out G-d’s will a tool in the hands of G-d or is he fully responsible for his actions. G-d has many ways to get His will done. If the person or persons—in this case, the brothers—would have done the right thing and not sold Yosef, G-d would have figured out other ways to attain His goals.

I must say on a personal level I favor the approach of the Akeidas Yitzchok. I’m afraid of an attitude that somehow absolves man’s responsibility and says what the person did is G-d’s will. No! Man is responsible for his choices. We are not in G-d’s place. G-d’s will shall be done in His infinite wisdom in ways He sees fit.

This concept is explained in Tanya (Igeret HaKodesh, chap. 25) If a person harms you, you should not be angry because this harm was meant by G-d to come to you. “And though a person possessing free will curses or hits him… and is therefore guilty according to the laws of man and the laws of Heaven for having chosen evil,” still what happened to you was decreed from Heaven, and G-d has many ways to bring it about.

In my mind this approach and the interpretation of the Akeidas Yitzchok leaves no room for us to excuse our actions and put the blame on G-d. You have free will, and you are responsible not only to the laws of man but to the laws of G-d as well.

Yosef reassures his brothers and “speaks to their hearts,” Rashi gives a wonderful explanation based on the Talmud and the Midrash. Yosef assures his brothers that he would not and could not harm them. “If ten candles could not extinguish one candle, how can one candle extinguish ten?”

The Midrash (R. Breishis 100:9) adds, “Ten stars were unable to destroy one star [how can one star destroy ten]?” The Maharal explains that each brother was a light and a star that illuminates the world. Each one is essential for the world. Each is indispensable.

Might I suggest that even though none of us can compare to the original tribes, nevertheless each one of us has a unique purpose and a unique mission. Each one of us must be a light and, yes, even a star to bring light and holiness to the world. We should each appreciate our own unique talents and gifts, but, just as important and perhaps even more, so should we look at every other Jew as unique, a light and star of his own.