



THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF OUR SHEVATIM

YOSEF AND HIS BROTHERS WERE COMPLETE TZADDIKIM

In parshas Vayeishev we learn of an encounter between Yosef and his brothers.

If you look into the wording, the Torah says that they were jealous of him. They hated him, and so on and so forth. The Torah uses very strong language. Most of us learned this in yeshiva or when we were little boys, and we decided that this was a major fight between the brothers, the שבטי קה, a very sad, tragic episode.

But we have to learn how to view this episode through mature, Torah eyes. The first thing you have to know and place before you, are the words of the great and holy Ramban. The Ramban says the following: “All of the stories that are written about our holy forefathers, including the *shevatim*, none of them are to be understood in simplistic terms, as if they happened with other people.” He writes like this: הכל נעשה מתוך דביקות גמורה בהשם יתברך, everything was done out of great attachment, a deep commitment to Hashem. And whatever the Torah views as a *chet* is only according to their exalted, holy *madreiga*, a level that human beings cannot even grasp or fathom. But from our perspective, we have to know this: If we would understand this episode, we would conclude that it’s not a פגם, it’s not even a defect, but rather a מעלה.

You hear this amazing Ramban? You would view this act of Yosef and his brothers as a מעלה? To give you a little insight, before the Ramban there was a Midrash Rabbah Parshas Nasso (13:18) which says as follows: “The episode that occurred with the great שבטי קה and which concluded with the sale of Yosef Hatzaddik, you might think would never transpire, unless they were *reshaim* in other actions and deeds in their lives.” If you would show me some brothers who sold off a brother, I would think these are *mamash* the real mafia. I would think these guys must be, who knows what. So, *zugt* the Midrash, no, it’s not true. אלא צדיקים גמורים היו ולא בא לידם חטא מעולם. “They were completely righteous, authentic tzaddikim, and they never sinned in their lives.” That’s a quote from the Midrash for you. They never did a חטא מעולם, forever and from ever. How can you say that?¹

Shimon, Reuven, you read the stories of their lives, and Chazal tell us they never, ever sinned. The Midrash brings a *rayah*. from the the *pasuk* later on, ויאמרו איש אל אחיו, “and each man said to his brother, ‘but we are guilty.’”

They were analyzing what they had done. When they suffered, the brothers started thinking: Why are we enduring this suffering? Why did they have this *gesheft* in Mitzrayim, getting caught in Mitzrayim?

They couldn’t find anything else but the story of Yosef. There wasn’t one episode in their life they could attribute this to other than Mechiras Yosef. That means they never even did *bitul Torah*!

When Yosef told them “*al tirgazu baderech*,” Rashi says it meant: Don’t get too involved in Torah.² There was nothing else they did in their lives. They were completely engrossed in the *da’as* of Hashem.

SELLING YOSEF WAS A ZECHUS FOR THE BROTHERS

Chazal tell us, ומתוך גנותם, because of this one episode that transpired, the Torah is actually bringing out their praise. This was their only *avon*. And you should know, says the Midrash, the *mechiras* Yosef was actually a *zechus* for them. When they did it, they didn’t do it with any bad intentions. It was considered an act of merit for them.

That’s why it brought about the reign of Yosef Hatzaddik. Because it was a good deed. He says that a bad deed could never have brought about positive results like that Yosef Hatzaddik should end up being the *melech* of Mitzrayim and paving the way in the future for the Yidden to come to Mitzrayim. And it was a *zechus* for the Shevatim and for their families, that because they sold him and he became a king, they had enough food to sustain them in the days of hunger. You know why? Listen to what the Midrash says: מגלגלין זכות על ידי זכאי, Hashem brings about *zechusim*, merits, through meritorious people and meritorious acts. That’s why it says in Parsha Naso the words: מלאה קטורת. They were full of קטורת, such beautiful, fragrant, tremendous *tzaddikim*. It’s very hard for us to think this way, it almost seems like an error. I don’t know what it was exactly, but Hashem made it happen. And Hashem didn’t get angry at them. Hashem didn’t fault them. We know from Chazal that Hashem joined them in this decision, the *beis din*, (that Yosef was *chayiv misa*).

¹ ויד אל תשלחו בו. עשרה זהב, שהציל עצמו שמיחה בהם והציל תשעה אחיו משפיכות דמים, ולקר פתיב זהב, שיש מין אחד בזהב הדומה לדם, וזהו זהב פרוים. מלאה קטרת, אף על פי שארע לשבטים שבא לידיהם מכירת יוסף, את סבור שלא היה בא לידם אותו המעשה אלא אם כן היו רשעים במעשה אחרים, לאו, אלא צדיקים גמורים היו ולא בא לידם חטא מעולם, אלא הוא, הדא הוא דכתיב (בראשית מב, כא): ויאמרו איש אל אחיו אבל אשמים אנחנו וגו', שהיו מפשפשים בעצמם למה ארע להם תפיסת מצרים ולא מצאו אלא זה בלבד, ומתוך גנותם ספר הכתוב שבחם שלא היה בידם עון אלא זה בלבד, ולפי שמכירת יוסף זכות היה לו שהיא גרמה לו למלה, וזכות היתה לאחיו ולכל בית אביו שנקללם בלחם בשני רעבון, לקר נמכר על דם, שמגלגלין זכות על ידי זכאי, הו מלאה קטרת, וכו'.
² אל תרגזו בדרך. אל תתעסקו בדבר הלכה שלא תרגז עליכם הדרך.

If it would have been a מעשה עבירה and a מעשה חטא, do you think Hashem would have joined them in their *beis din* when they judged Yosef? Unbelievable! When it says in the *pasuk* that Yosef told לשון הרע about them to their father, it says they hated him. They couldn't talk to him. They were jealous of him, and they continued to hate him even more. They said, "Come, let us kill him and throw his body in one of the pits."

שנאה, קנאה, לשון הרע. How do *middos* like these exist by these holy *shevatim*?! You know what Chazal tells us? The Midrash says: צדיקים גמורים היו. They were צדיקים גמורים. And they never sinned in their lives before this moment! They were on such a level of righteousness that they had never sinned. We can't imagine such a thing.

Today we hear things about people who seem to be *tzaddikim*, who seem to be *chashuvim*, who seem to have great merits, and they end up doing terrible things. And we don't understand those things either. Now, I don't grasp, I don't *chap* how people like that could do such things. But with the *shevatim*, it is different.

You have to know when you tell it to your children, you can't simply tell it to them on a basic level as though *Shevatim* did a *chet*. When you learn this סוגיא, you have to learn it through the Torah's perspective. This is not a Slabodka *shittah*. In Slabodka, they had a very positive look at the Torah. Even with Eisav, they had a hard time calling him Eisav Harasha. The Brisker Rov didn't like that. "Eisav is Eisav Harasha," that's how he used to say. The אמת is we don't have a מושג what Eisav was, but Eisav was a *rasha*.

It doesn't say the *Shevatim* did such a heinous act. At the very least they should have been called *reshaim*. They weren't called *reshaim*, and Chazal say לא בא לידי חטא מעולם. So, as you mature and look at the Torah with a deeper outlook, you have to try to adjust your perspective and see it from a different light. Was there some subtle perspective or underlying factor that was slightly off in their decision to sell Yosef? Yes. Minute. But like the Ramban says, if we were to view these actions and study them and we had gotten a front row seat to see it happening, we would have considered it a *zechus*. We would have thought, "Wow, what *tzaddikim*!" As the speaker once said: Had you gotten a true front row seat, you would have seen what really happened.

THE MACHLOKES IN VOLOZHIN

There was once a big *machlokes* in Volozhin, the mother of all *yeshivos*. This *machlokes* started way back when. You know what year the *machlokes* started? The *machlokes* in Volozhin was between the ראשי ישיבות, גדולי הדור. It started in the year ת"ריז, that's 1857. So a *machlokes* burst out in the holy *yeshiva* between very holy people. The Netziv, R' Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893), as he was referred to in Brisk as Rav Hirsh. The other party was the great Beis HaLevi, Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveichik (1820-1892). It was such a holy *machlokes*, I tried many times to milk it out of my Rabbi, to get an insight about what took place. I read reports about the *machlokes*.

My Rabbi would not discuss it. He said the *machlokes* is so above us, what happened and the way it was run was with totally different criteria than what we assume. The engagement in the *machlokes*, that's אסור for us. It has no *shaichus* to us. But at the time, they decided they had to settle it, they had to find a resolution between these two great giants. So, they were looking for somebody who they could invite to Volozhin to quiet the fires.

And they settled on a great Maggid from Vilna, the Vilna Maggid. His name was Rav Zev Wolf, ז"ל. He was also a famous *dayan*, one of the elder judges in the *beis din* in Vilna. And these two sides had good טענות, and he listened to both sides. And then Rav Zev Wolf said, "May I speak now?" I've heard the two sides. They said, "Yes." He said, "מורי ורבותי. Today we're holding in *Parshas Vayeishev*." They both looked at him. "Very strange," they thought. *Parshas Vayeishev*? They were holding at the end of Chodesh Tishrei. They were holding after Sukkos already! No one was reading *Parshas Vayeishev* then. So they both lifted up their eyes to him in wonder. And he said, "Let me explain what I mean."

He said, "What is the role of a Maggid? What does a Maggid do? I'm expected to come and give דרשות every single week regarding the פרשת השבוע. People want to hear what I have to say about the פרשת השבוע. *B'derech klal*, I find the *tzaddik* in the parsha. I find his competition, the *rasha*, in the parsha. And I elevate the actions of the *tzaddik*, and I denigrate the actions of the *rasha*. And I show what's good and what's bad, and I hope people follow the good and distance themselves from the bad." He continued. "On the other hand, I talk a lot about the bad, how terrible it is. In the whole of פרשת בראשית, I always had no problem finding what to say. I looked in פרשת בראשית and I saw there was Adam HaRishon and Chava.

Adam HaRishon and Chava symbolized the greatness, and the *nachash* - the יצר הרע symbolized the מסית ומדיח - the negative. I also had another one. In some *parshiyos*, maybe I get two דרשות. We had Kayin, the murderer, against Hevel, who brought his *kaorbanos* to Hashem, willingly. Then, we have Parshas Noach that says: נח איש צדיק בדורותיו. Noach was a big *tzaddik*. Against that, the terrible *dor* of the מבול, generation of the flood. They were involved with גזל, ערייות, busy with theft, robbery, and ערייות. Then you have Parshas Lech Lecha, with Avraham Avinu. Against that you have Pharaoh, melech Mitzrayim. Then you have Lot and Yishmael against Avraham. In parshas Vayeira, you have Avraham against the people of Sedom. Terrible people. Yitzhak is the opposite of Yishmael. Great speeches, great lessons. In parshas Toldos, you have Yakov against Eisav. You have בני יעקב on one side against Chamor and Shechem. Great speeches there as well. So in every *parsha*, I'm able to come and show clearly the חילוק between the טוב and the רע and I expound on them to sharpen the חילוקים, the differences, between them."

“But when it comes to Parshas Vayeishev, I get stuck. On the one hand, we find Yosef HaTzaddik but on the other hand, his brothers were also great tzaddikim. So I don’t have anything to say. I’m in a pickle. I get into a tight spot. How am I going to explain it? Who am I going to pick out as the bad one and who’s the good one? They’re both קדושים וטהורים. They were both אנשי ה’, men of ה’, whose *heilighen neshamos* came from *shamyaim*. These people were clean from any stain of sin.” He said, “Rabbosai, we’re holding in Parshas Vayeishev! You put me in Parshas Vayeishev. I’ve been involved in settling disputes for a long time. But over here, how can I decide between two great ישיבה? The Netziv of Volozhin on one side, and the Beis HaLevi on the other side. It’s not *shayach* for me to say which one’s right and which one’s wrong. I can’t do that. How could I get my head in between these two great giants and decide who’s wrong and who’s right?”

This story brings out how we’re supposed to look at *Parshas Vayeishev*. If somebody teaches his children or he himself learns the Torah, and he says, “The *shvatim* were terrible. Yosef was such a sweet kid. His father loved him. He was a בן זקונים. He was a friendly child. He was מקרב the children of the שפחות. He walked around, he combed his hair nicely. He always looked nice. He looked like a nice kid. You know, he was a real ‘with-it’ kind of guy, friendly to everybody, good-looking. On the other hand, you have the rough and tough older brothers, little monsters.” And this is where it’s important to realize, Rabbosai that this premise, this picture is completely false, it’s *sheker*, it’s כזב, it’s not the Torah. Now, I will give an example.

WHY TEN HARUGEI MALCHUS REJOICED

You may ask a question: We do find in Chazal that later on in history, Hashem sought retribution for this story. There’s a famous *pasuk* that states: הגונב איש ומכרו מות יומת “one who kidnaps a person and sells him will surely die” (Shemos 21:16). The infamous Turnus Rufus Harasha, who served under the Roman emperor Hadrian, called in the great *Tannaim* and said to them, “Does it say that in your Torah? What’s the punishment for somebody who kidnaps and sells a person? What’s the פסק?” “The punishment is death,” they answered. The king said, “Well, you’re going to have to die then. The Bnei Yakov sold Yosef, and they and they’ve never received their פסק, their death sentence”³

So Hakodosh Boruch Hu גזור ten of the Chachmei Yisroel that they should be killed. These are known as the עשרה הרוגי מלכות.

So when Rebbi Yishmael, who was the Cohen Gadol, a super, super tzaddik, a giant of unimaginable heights, hears this, you know what he says? הוא - ולא מצא הקדוש ברוך הוא “Hashem couldn’t find couldn’t find ten tzaddikim to collect from them for this judgment more than me?” So Rebbi Yishmael went up to Shamayim and he asked this question in Shamayim. They knew how the story came about. He says, “Hashem is collecting from me for the *shevatim*’s actions?” You know how many years were between Yosef and Rebbi Yishmael? Quite a few years. Hashem could not find anybody else?! אמר לו מטטרון, The לא מצא הקדוש, שמים in מלאך, Metatron told him, “What kind of שאלה are you asking? הייך, I swear to you, שמים in מלאך, “The punishment is death,” they answered. The king said, “Well, you’re going to have to die then. The Bnei Yakov sold Yosef, and they and they’ve never received their פסק, their death sentence”³

equivalent to Yakov’s children, the *shevatim*.” כיון שמעו, as soon as Rebbi Yishmael heard this, ירד לארץ, he came down back to the earth, and found his *chaverim* who were fasting and davening. And they said to him, “מה בידך, “What did you come back with?” And he said to them, “Go, רחצו, bathe, purify yourself, put on תכריכים. It’s a גזירה מלפני הקדוש ברוך הוא.” Rebbi Yishmael said, “When I came back down and told my friends the עדות that I received, the testimony I received in Shamayim, all of my friends rejoiced. They came to sit. They made a *seudah* with food and drink. Rebbi Yishmael and his colleague בגמליאל, רבן שמעון בן גמליאל, were both rejoicing but they were also mourning. They were mourning because it was decreed upon them a משונה. And they were happy and dancing because Hakodosh Boruch Hu told them that they were the first group that was the equivalent to the B’nei Yakov. You know how many years went by from the time of Yaakov till that time? Close to 2,000 years!

Do you hear that? They lived after the first המקדש, בית המקדש, and during the period of second המקדש. And in all those 2,000 years, Hashem couldn’t find ten people that were equivalent to the B’nei Yakov?! It’s mind boggling. Not even in the דור המדבר, that was the דור דעה. Not in the days of יהושע. Not in the days of שופטים. Not in the days of נביאים. Not in the days of שלמה המלך, until these ten Tannaim came around. Hashem chose them because they were ראוי to be the equivalent of the B’nei Yakov. And they’re the ones who could be מכפר for the sale of Yosef. The *lashon* of Chazal is, “You sold your brother. I swear to you,” Hashem says, “I’m going to collect retribution from your grandchildren from the most חשוב of them, מיושבי בלשכת הגזית.

³ ובאותה שעה שהזכיר את השם קבלתו רוח סערה והעלתה אותו לשמים, וכיון שעלה פגע בו מטטרון שר הפנים אמר לו מי אתה? אלא אני ישמעאל בן אלישע כהן גדול, אמר לו אתה ישמעאל שקורן משתבח בך כל היום ואומר יש לי עבד בארץ כמותך זיו כדורך ומראהו כמראה? אמר לו אני הוא ישמעאל. אמר לו מה טיבך במקום הזה, אלא גזרה גזרה עלינו המלכות להרוג עשרה מחכמי ישראל, ועליתי לידע אם גזרה זו מן השמים נקבלה עלינו ואם לאו שאינה מן השמים יכולים לבטלה. אמר לו במה אתם יכולים לבטלה, אלא בשם, אלא מטטרון שר הפנים אשר יך ישראל שגלה לכם הקדוש ברוך הוא שוד השם שלא גלה אותו למלאכי השרת, שאתם יכולים לבטל את הגזרות בשם המפורש. אך אי ישמעאל בני כן שמעתי מאחורי הפרגוד בת קול צווחת ואומרת עשרה מחכמי ישראל מסורין למלכות. אלא ר’ ישמעאל למה, אלא מפני שהיתה מריבה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא סמאל עם מיכאל ואמר לפני רבש”ע כלום כתבת בכל התורה אות אחת לבטלה, והלא כתיב לא נפל דבר אחד וגו’, והנה כתיב וגונב איש ומכרו וגו’, ובני יעקב שמכרו את יוסף עדיין לא גבית מהם דינם. מיד גזר הקדוש ברוך הוא על עשרה מחכמי ישראל שיהרגו. השיב ר”א ואמר ולא מצא הקדוש ברוך הוא עשרה שיפרע מהם דינו של יוסף אלא ממנו? אלא מטטרון אי ישמעאל חייך לא מצא הקדוש ברוך הוא עשרה ששקולים כבני יעקב כלא אתם, אמר לו ומה זה לפניך? אלא מזבח, אלא וכי קרב ומזבח יש למעלה, אלא כל מה שיש למטה יש למעלה, דהא כתיב בנה בניתי בית זבול לך. אמר לו ומה אתם מקריבים עליו, וכי יש לכם פרים אילים וכבשים? אלא אין לנו לא פרים ולא אילים וכבשים אלא נשמותיהם של צדיקים אנו מקריבים עליו לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא. כיון ששמע ר”א כך אמר הא למדתי מה שלא שמעתי מעולם, וכיון ששמע את דברי מטטרון ירד לארץ וצא את חביריו בתענית ובתפלה, אמרו לו מה בידך, אמר להם לנו ורחצו והטהרו ולבשו תכריכין שלכם שגזרה זו מלפני הקדוש ברוך הוא. אלא ישמעאל כשבתאי והעדתי עדות זו מלפני כסא הכבוד, שמחו כל חבירי וישבו לפני ר’ נחוניא בן הקנה ועשו משתה ושמחה, וישב ר’ ישמעאל והשב”ג בן זוגו והיו שמחין ומתאבלין, מתאבלין משמאל שנקנסה עליהם מיתה משונה, ושמחין ומרקדין מימין על שהבטיחם הקדוש ברוך הוא שהם שקולין כבני יעקב, ולא עוד אלא שאמר להם הנשיא בשמחתם: אלהי ישראל יקבל נפשותינו קרבן לעשות מהן נקם ברומי הרשעה, נגילה ונשמחה בשמחת כנור ועוגב, והיו יושבים ועוסקין בהלכות פסח ושונים אלו עוברין בפסח כותח הבבלי זה אומר מחמיץ זה אומר אינו מחמיץ, ולא הספיקו לגמור את ההלכה עד שבא הגמון של מלך וחרבו שלופה בידו, אמר להם עדיין לבלבכם פנוי בתורה והרי אתם יודעים קצנם שנקנסה עליכם דין מיתה. (אוצר מדרשים (אינזנטיון) עשרה הרוגי מלכות)

So, on the one hand, we find greatness in Yosef Hatzaddik - off the charts. Chazal say that Yosef was similar to his father. He was a carbon copy of his father, *mamash*. Chazal list many, many things, about 20 things in which Yosef was comparable to his father. Yakov Avinu saw in Yosef the best of his children. He was דומה, very similar to him and he gave over to him all the Torah that he learned from שם ועבר. It's amazing. Yakov taught Yosef the *mesorah*, something you can't even imagine. And on the other hand you see the greatness of the Shevatim and Hashem's apparent response. So we should grasp that this *episode* is so obviously above us, way beyond what we can ever understand. With the little glimpse we got today, we now have to start to study this *parsha* in light of what we just heard.

And with Hashem's help, we shall. But not today...

IN CONCLUSION

Sometimes, as the Maggid of Vilna said, the difference between good and evil is clear. We learn to do good and we keep far away from evil. The *parsha* of Mechiras Yosef is completely different. The Shevatim were great, pure *tzaddikim*, and Yosef Hatzaddik was a great, pure *tzaddik*. We cannot say one side was good and the other side was bad. All we can say is that we cannot begin to understand what the *machlokes* was really about. However, we do have several *maamarei Chazal* that point out the extremely high level and stature of these *tzaddikim*. Therefore, first, we must learn these *maamarei Chazal* and then, they should be our guiding light when we come to learn this *parsha*. The only way to learn the *parsha* is through the eyes of the Torah. We must completely put aside our personal judgement of the events as they appear to our limited understanding. This week, (*bli neder*), I will practice "not understanding" the *machlokes* of real *tzaddikim*, reserving my own judgement, and only asking, "What does the Torah say?"