

Torah From a Mussar Perspective
***Parshat Mikketz* – Genesis 41:1-44:17**
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Our world is filled with drama. For some, this is also true in these late December weeks, which may be filled with various gatherings. So too in our Torah portion, *Parshat Mikketz*. Last week we met Joseph and read of how he ended up in Egypt. In this week's portion, Joseph comes to the attention of Pharaoh for the very same talent which led his brothers to sell him to a passing band of Ishmaelites – interpreting dreams. However, now his talent for explaining dreams lands him in a high position in Pharaoh's court. In the meantime, the family back at home is feeling the impact of a famine, and Joseph's brothers are sent to Egypt to procure rations. This brings them before Joseph, whom they do not recognize. The ensuing back and forth has them returning home to bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, who shares Rachel as his mother with Joseph, down to Egypt. A strategy is crafted by Joseph which leads him to accuse the brothers of theft, though he surreptitiously had the "stolen" goblet placed in Benjamin's bag.

In Genesis 44:14-17 we read of a tense and dramatic exchange between Judah and the mysterious Egyptian leader [Joseph] which closes out this week's portion:

When Judah and his brothers re-entered the house of Joseph, who was still there, they threw themselves on the ground before him. Joseph said to them, "What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me practices divination?"

Judah replied, "What can we say to my lord? How can we plead; how can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered the crime of your servants. Here we are, then, slaves of my lord, the rest of us as much as he in whose possession the goblet was found."

But [Joseph] replied, "Far be it from me to act thus! Only the one in whose possession the goblet was found shall be my slave; the rest of you go back in peace to your father."

We can easily imagine the complicated emotions on all sides of this family drama. Judah knows that the brothers have not stolen anything. Yet, in his heart of hearts, he knows that there are defects in his character, and wrongful actions in their past.

On the words, "GOD HAS FOUND OUT," Rashi comments, "We know that we have done no wrong, but it has been brought about by the Holy One that this should come upon us. The Creditor has found an opportunity to collect the debt."¹ Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra goes further, stating, "They are speaking by way of parable. We committed a sin. It was, as it were, lost and long forgotten. But [it appears it has been] found today." The commentators imagine Judah

¹ Rashi is citing Midrash Genesis Rabbah 92:9.

thinking to himself, we may have escaped human consequences for what we did to our brother Joseph, save for our father's anger and grief. But now, it appears that God will take payment for our misdeed.

Rabbi Ben Zion Bamberger² links this episode with the Rabbinic concept of *middah k'neged middah*. We might understand this as *quid pro quo* -- the brothers are now receiving their bitter medicine for their past deeds. Rabbi Bamberger teaches,

When we find ourselves facing troubles, we should [not ignore] that this may be an example of *middah k'neged middah*/[literally] "one measure leading to an equal measure" from the Holy One.

[Such things] happen, in order to teach people to understand the consequences of their sins and any harm [which may befall others on account of those sins. Furthermore,] such awareness in a time of trouble can enlighten us, when we face a seeming absence of *rachmanut*/compassion. [When this happens] we should examine our *middot*, and seek to correct any defects within our *middot*.³

Rav Bamberger explains that this may have been the awakening to which the brothers came as they remember their sin in selling their brother Joseph into slavery. However, as the Rav teaches, it may well be that the brothers do not yet fully comprehend what they did in selling their brother. He points us to a comment by Ovadia Sforno who teaches, "**God has found the iniquity.** God is punishing us not for this deed, of which we are innocent, but for a much earlier crime."

Rav Bamberger states,

This is clarified for us from the lesson of the *sh'vatim*/tribes [meaning the brothers]: For an *adam shaleym*/a person who is striving towards wholeness, *yissurim*/sufferings [or tribulations] will act as a form of *tochechah*/rebuke, a sign from heaven to refine their *middot* and their virtues.⁴

In our Jewish calendar we marked *Rosh Hashanah* back in early October. We know that the month of *Elul* and the *Yamim Noraim* call for *Heshbon Ha-Nefesh*, taking stock of our words and deeds as we prepare to enter a New Year. In the world in which we live, a different counting is bringing us to mark a different new year in the coming days. For many, awareness of the secular new year also leads to *heshbon ha-nefesh*/accounting of the soul, as we reflect on the secular year gone by. Rav Bamberger's lesson from the experience of the brothers, as well as our Festival of *Chanukah*, can offer us the same opportunity to reflect upon our words, deeds, and even thoughts over the year which is passing.

² Rabbi Bamberger's teaching is cited in *Chochmat HaMatzpun*, volume 3, pages 257-60.

³ I am paraphrasing a piece Rav Bamberger's teaching as found on page 258.

⁴ Ibid.

As Rav Bamberger teaches,

When a person recognizes *cheyto*/their failings, because of what may seem to be a punishment, they can [choose to] see this as a [sign] from the Holy One of *middah k'neged middah* - a [rebuke] from God.⁵

In the context of the *Mussar* tradition this fits with the overall perspective expressed in *Talmud Berachot* 33b, "Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except *yirat shamayim*/the fear of Heaven." This can easily lead us to think of the *middot* of *Emunah*/faith, *Bitachon*/Trust [in God]; and *Yir'ah*/Fear (or Awe.) These are challenging *middot* for many in today's world as they are expressed in the classic *Mussar* literature. Nonetheless, Rav Bamberger's lesson, that we should examine our own deeds and *middot* when life challenges us, and correct our ways as best we can, is an important part of why we stay on the *Mussar* path, seeking to become the best version of the person we are each capable of becoming.

As Rav Bamberger reads Judah's internal reflection in the face of the challenge of the accusations against Benjamin, we can easily also imagine that Joseph too, is reflecting on his own words and deeds in the past. This reflection, this *heshbon ha-nefesh* and the *hitlamdut* it can provide can help us balance ourselves as we face challenges and chart our course towards being that better version of ourselves.

May the light we glean from Joseph and his brothers, their struggles, and growing wisdom brighten our paths, just as our *Chanukah* lights bring greater light and warmth at a time of growing darkness in our physical world at this season.

Chag Urim Sameach!

FOR FOCUS:

- As you look into the growing light each night of the festival, what is illuminated for you in your *Mussar* work?
- Where might you apply *hitlamdut* in this darkest season as we turn the page on our secular calendar and look towards the growing light?
- As we reflect on the relationship between Joseph and his brothers, where might we turn to reflect in our own constellation of relationships and seize the opportunity for forgiveness, healing and strengthening a relationship in our lives?

⁵ Ibid.