

## On a Mission From God

In this week's Parsha, *Vayigash*, we read about the exciting reunion of Joseph and his family. Joseph cracks under the pressure of Judah's persistent refusal to leave Benjamin as a captive to Joseph in Egypt. He finally announces, tearfully, 'I am Joseph; is my father still living?' The brothers cannot even respond; they are left speechless. Of course, the shock is a great burden. Rashi reads this as an indication of their shame. The Midrash highlights Joseph's words as an example of a stinging rebuke. When we are shown to be in the wrong, what can we say?

Joseph fills up the silence. He tries to ease the brothers' shame: "It was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt." (Gen 45:8) The brothers sold Joseph as an attempt to be rid of the dreamer. It was an act of hatred, stirred by feeling of jealousy and vanity; it was a violent cruelty which caused the family to hemorrhage and plunged their father into unrelenting grief.

The famous account of the 10 rabbinic martyrs who were executed by Roman oppressors begins when the emperor uses the sale of Joseph as a pretext to exact punishment. God, in that tale, urges the rabbis to submit to the penalty. Putting the terrible conclusion aside, the story assumes a crime was committed and a punishment needs to be meted out; justice needs to be done.

Given our reading – that the sale of Joseph was criminal and immoral – how are we to understand Joseph's words of comfort. 'You did not send me, but God...' They *did* send him to Egypt and they were wrong for doing so. Was God an accomplice in Joseph misfortunes?!

The Malbim analogizes this to a person who accidentally bumps his friends into a puddle and when the friend is in the muck, he finds a precious stone. Joseph's sale to Egypt by his brothers was *accidental*, in this reading. Though they plotted and acted in hateful and injurious ways, they were not aware of the greater picture surrounding them. God appointed it to be so and, so despite their worst intentions, it was destined to come to a positive ending. (See Malbim, *ibid*)

This raises difficult moral questions: If I believe myself to be an agent of God, acting out my mission for the Almighty, am I freed of consequence for my mistakes and misjudgments? As with the case of the brothers, do I become an accidental offender, even if the circumstances would seem to suggest that my actions were premeditated? We don't only look at the ends; the means matter. Acting on God's behalf has been a mantra for the misguided; a free pass for the fanatic. Joseph provides language for these abuses to become normative.

We might resolve the potential moral problems that Joseph's words could allow by contextualizing his reply. The brothers were stunned into silence, humiliated beyond words, Joseph tried to mollify his deeply unsettled brothers. Another resolution is that Joseph could only make this claim in hindsight. Perhaps, we are all carrying a mission from God on high, but while we are in it –we are unable to appreciate the meaning or scope of that mission. However, after the passage of time, we gain a perspective and we can truly find an inner peace, knowing that our lives coincide with God's plan.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,  
Rabbi Menashe East