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Where Do We Fit In?

Parshat Vayigash richly teaches us lessons in psychology and diplomacy and imparts messages regarding *Hashkafah* and educational technique. For example, when Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, he is faced with a critical challenge of communication. On the one hand, he can castigate the brothers, blame them for all his misfortunes, throw them into jail, and forget about them as they had (up to a point) forgotten about him.

On the other hand, Yosef could appease the sullen siblings who were guilt-ridden and on the defensive. Yehuda had just eloquently and forcefully stepped up to the plate and, representing the others, presented his plea to the Egyptian master. He was ready to offer himself as a slave to Yosef in place of Binyamin.

Yosef had now seen the remorse of his brothers. But how could he fashion a rapprochement with them such that the all the brothers could remain united and yet reconcile themselves to the turn of events?

Here is where we see Yosef's diplomatic skills surface; here, we discern his keen sensitivity and powerful use of language.

First, without any unnecessary ado, Yosef states the facts: *"I am Yosef, your brother, whom you sold to Egypt."* Then, as the brothers are still in shock and probably pondering their immediate punishment, Yosef deflates the emotional charge by telling the pained brothers not to be distressed, not to reproach themselves *"for selling me here."* Yosef allowed their high blood pressure to abate so that they could imbibe the next line. It was time to interpret the facts.

"So that I might be a provider, God sent me here ahead of you."

Nechama Leibowitz discerned three aspects of this statement that stand out:

This statement is a simple explanation appealing to the family's existential state. The only reason for the brothers' original presence in Egypt was the famine in Canaan, and their hungry need to acquire food. The brothers could assimilate that information immediately. But now, Yosef takes the narrative to a new level.

Yosef introduces the concept of *Hashgachah*, namely, Hashem's intervention in daily affairs.

Yosef then interweaves the actions of Man and the Divine: You *sold* me, but Hashem *sent* me! The events were

not coincidental – I am but Hashem’s *shaliach*, His messenger. I am part of a bigger plan.

And now it was time for Yosef to reveal the bigger picture. In addition to ensuring the family’s survival in the land, the brothers were to learn that their sustenance had a greater purpose: You (the family) will be sustained “*for a momentous deliverance.*” For this reason, Yosef continues, “*It was not you who sent me here, but God.*”

Yosef would be an instrument in the unfolding divine plan

How serene, how artful, how sublime! The brothers’ self-image is momentarily built up, for suddenly, they were instruments in Hashem’s plan. Nevertheless, before they could get carried away by Yosef’s revelation, they would have noted (as we should) that he did not forgive them for their earlier actions towards him. The iniquity stands in place; their original dastardly intentions to destroy Yosef could not be wiped out.

Hashem had announced to Avraham that his descendants would be strangers in a foreign land. Most likely, Yaakov understood that when he sent his favorite son to seek his brothers, Yosef would be an instrument in the unfolding divine plan. (No wonder, following the Midrash, Yaakov recited the *Shema* when he was reconciled with Yosef. He knew that suffering was coming down.)

In truth, besides possibly learning

from Yosef how to get messages across sensitively to the wayward amongst us, we might also ask ourselves where *we* fit into the bigger picture and what role we could take (however small) to be partners with Hashem in our unfolding destiny. ■

Shabbat Shalom!

Menachem Persoff



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