BS”D

Parshas Miketz 5776

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*Attain wealth, attain power, enjoy yourself. Is that what life really is?*

Yehuda’s Choice

Yosef has arranged to plant his silver goblet in the sack of his brother Binyamin. The brothers are brought back to Yosef who admonishes them for “stealing” his goblet. Yehuda steps forward and speaks. “What can we say to my lord, how can we speak, how can we justify ourselves? G-d has uncovered the sin of your servants.” (Breishis 44:16)

The Midrash Raba comments, “What can we say…” about the first-time money (that you know quite well you placed in our sacks). “How can we speak…” about the second-time money placed in our sacks?. “How can we justify…” the silver goblet.

In other words, how can we defend ourselves against something you know perfectly well was a set-up against us? The Midrash continues, “What can we say…” about the incident with Tamar. “How can we speak…” about (what we did at the incident of) Dina. “How can we justify…” the incident of Bilhah.

The Midrash continues: “What can we say…” about what we did to our father by (selling) Yosef. “How can we speak…” about (our culpability in the fate of) Shimon. “How can we justify ourselves” about what we did to Binyamin.

Should we tell you we have sinned? You know perfectly well we have not sinned. On the other hand, can we say we have not sinned? “G-d has uncovered the sin of your servants.”

There are two worlds, the brothers are saying. There is this world of deceit, lies and falsehood. You have manipulated that world through your power and caused us to appear as if we have sinned. But you know that’s a lie.

But there is another world. The world of truth and of G-d’s law. In that world, both in what we did outside of the sale of Yosef, as well as what we did in selling our brother we are guilty. In that world of truth, how can we say we have not sinned?

Yosef replies to Yehuda. I am a compassionate man. I will not hold all of you as slaves. Only the culprit Binyamin will be enslaved and as for the rest of you, “Go back in peace to your father.”

The Midrash comments, “Peace!? This is a hollow, empty peace to go back without Binyamin. Yet a heavenly voice rings out, “There is great peace to those that love your Torah.”

Yosef is giving the brothers a choice. You can still choose the false world. Embrace it, and you will be free men! What will happen to Binyamin? Well, that’s too bad. But at least you will be free.

Or you have another choice. To embrace G-d’s truth. To defend Binyamin, to offer yourself as a slave in his stead, to go forward to an uncertain future, but to speak the truth, G-d’s truth. Then the heavenly voice cries out, you will have peace. Real peace.

Let’s change our focus now, and look back at the liberation of Yosef from prison. (Much of what follows is based on the Mei HaShiloach.)

According to Chazal, Yosef had already been in prison for ten years when he interpreted the dreams of the butler and the baker. Then he was in prison for another two years.

The ten years were to atone for his sin against his ten brothers. After he was purified by the ten years, he needed another two years to purify himself because of the suffering he had brought upon himself and upon his brother Binyamin. This in itself was a sin that required a separate atonement.

Another explanation of the two years is that Yosef, or anyone who seeks Hashem, has to purify himself of two sins: Do not murder and do not commit adultery. On a spiritual level, “Do not murder” means to truly cherish your friend, to have no envy or jealousy towards him, to want only good and blessing for him.

“Do not commit adultery” means, on a spiritual level, to desire nothing from the world. The world’s separateness from G-d is an illusion, and so are all the delights of the world. What a person should desire is to delight in G-d, the true reality.

When Yosef had purified himself on these two levels, he was ready to be freed from prison.

The Alter Rebbe expresses a similar idea to the Mei HaShiloach’s broad view of what it means to not commit adultery:

When a person contemplates that in reality there is nothing but G-d and that everything in the world merely *seems* separate from him, then the person longs mightily to cleave to G-d. For that is the truth of existence and that is what the person wants. He wants nothing else—nothing physical, nothing spiritual —only G-d.

I would put this idea in a simple, non-mystical form:

We ask ourselves, what is meaningful, what is substantial, what is real. There is much in the world that is sham. Fame, fortune, pleasure—are they real? The world sets various goals for us. Attain wealth, attain power, enjoy yourself. Is that what life really is? The “world” says yes! But if we go deeper, we know that that “yes” is a lie. Goodness, holiness, love of mankind, love of G-d—that is the real life.

Yosef discovers through his suffering what real life is. He learns to not only forgive but to love his brothers. He overcomes the temptations of Potiphar’s wife and the temptations of worldliness as a whole. And he sets out to teach this to his brothers. He creates a situation where the brothers represented by Yehuda are forced to choose between “freedom” in the worldly sense and true freedom. The worldly freedom entails abandoning of Binyamin and thus abandoning of all goodness. Or they can choose what appears to be slavery in order to stand up for goodness and righteousness and to save Binyamin.

Yehuda must choose which vision to follow. The vision of worldly good or the vision of G-dly good. On this choice depends the future of whether or not there will be a holy Jewish people. The Parsha ends dramatically as Yehuda is poised to make that choice.