

Now Yisrael loved Yosef more than all of his sons...His brothers saw that it was he whom their father loved most of all his brothers so they hated him...So his brothers were jealous of him. (37:3,4,11)

Clearly the story of Yosef and his brothers is one of the most difficult passages in the Torah to understand. One must view everything which occurs in the Torah and the Torah's description of these events through a spiritual lens, understanding full well that the actions of our ancestors are beyond our understanding, and completely inexplicable from a simplistic, secular perspective. Do we even have an idea concerning the spiritual persona of Yosef *HaTzaddik* – or his brothers, the *Shivtei Kah*? In a passage of the *Midrash (Midrash Eileh Ezkerah)*, *Chazal* say the following: "Rabbi Yishmael said, 'When I returned (from Heaven – when the Roman beast sought to condemn the Ten Martyred *Tannaim* for the sale of Yosef, the *Tannaim* asked Rabbi Yishmael to ascend to Heaven and inquire if this decree is for real: Was it specifically decreed by Heaven, or just another act of anti-Semitism?) and relayed that the decree was, indeed, from Heaven, all of my colleagues celebrated.' Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel simultaneously mourned and celebrated. On the one hand, they mourned because they would have to die in a most cruel and brutal manner. On the other hand, they celebrated, since Hashem had intimated to Rabbi Yishmael that the *Tannaim* were compared to the sons of Yaakov (whose place they were taking, because the evil Roman King felt that they should be executed for their ancestor's sale of Yosef). The *Tannaim* were far from simple Jews. Each and every one of them was capable of resurrecting the dead. Yet, when they heard that in Heaven they were being compared to the *Shivtei Kah*, they rejoiced." We now have some faint idea of the spiritual plateau achieved by the *Shevatim*.

The image of Yosef *HaTzaddik* (either as an ox or *keruv*/young child, which is debated in the *Talmud*) is engraved on the *Kisei HaKavod*, Holy Throne. We are acutely aware that Yosef and his brothers who "play" the role of adversaries were holy beyond description. Thus, we realize that what is written in the Torah concerning this tragedy is all relative. This means that, according to their lofty plateau, their actions hinted at jealousy and hatred. Yosef's speaking *lashon hora*, slanderous speech, against his brothers is to be understood in a similar vein. Everything that Yosef did was *al pi halachah*, according to the strictest concerns of Jewish law. For Yosef to relate to his father what he felt were his brothers' spiritual shortcomings was no different than putting on *Tefillin*. He saw it as a *mitzvah*. He was not doing anything wrong. It certainly was not personal.

What about Yosef's combing his hair while in the home of Potifar? This was surely not the behavior that would be expected of a *tzaddik*. **Horav Shmuel Truvitz, zl**, comments that Yosef attempted to conceal his spiritual persona, the fact that he was a *ben Chakim*, wise son. Thus, he behaved like any teenager obsessed with the physical would act: eating, drinking, addressing his physical appearance. This is why his brothers thought little of him. When he came to Egypt, he continued playing with his long, beautiful hair. **Horav Yosef Salant, zl**, cites the *Talmud Shabbos*

139a that says Yosef was a *nazir* who was not permitted to cut his hair. He figured that as long as he took care of his locks and maintained a respectful appearance, Potifar would not compel him to take a haircut.

Horav Reuven Karlinstein, Shlita, sums it up in the following way: Regardless of the various interpretations and explanations rendered in order to make sense of the actions of our ancestors, we must remember that, after all is said and done, we have no clue as to the spiritual eminence of the *Shevatim*. He says (and I paraphrase), "The spiritual plateau achieved by an observant Jew, a *ben Torah* during *Neilah* (closing prayer of *Yom Kippur*, which is the spiritual apex of the entire year, and the supreme level that a Jew reaches), when he cries out, '*Shema Yisrael*,' followed by, '*Hashem Hu Ha'Elokim*,' seven times, becomes higher and higher each time until he reaches the climax of the holiest day of the year. At this moment (his most elevated), he has not achieved even one millionth of the holiness and purity which Yosef *HaTzaddik* was imbued with when he combed his hair!"

The *Maggid* concludes with an incident that occurred concerning **Horav Chaim Soloveitchik/Brisker, zl**. He once paused during his *shiur* to scan a *sefer*. While he was peering into the *sefer*, two students who were at the *shiur* began to whisper to one another, unaware that *Rav* Chaim could hear their conversation. "What would happen if David *Hamelech* would suddenly appear in our *bais hamedrash*? What would be the reaction?" one student asked his study partner. *Rav* Chaim lifted up his eyes from the *sefer* and said, "What are you asking, 'What would be if David *Hamelech* visited our *bais hamedrash*?' Let me tell you what would take place. *Mir valten ale farbrent givaren fun zein kedushah!* We would all be burnt up from his holiness!"

Do we have any idea of the caliber of sanctity evinced by those who have preceded us? We maintain a cavalier attitude regarding them, as if they were one of us – or, rather, we were one of them. We cannot even begin to imagine the spiritual plane upon which they stood – let alone speak about them as equals. It is this aura of awe and respect that we must transmit to students and children. First and foremost is that we learn to accept and demonstrate this level of respect ourselves.