

"And Yosef reported evil about them (his brothers) to their father." (37:7)

Upon hearing about Yosef's constant tale-bearing, the brothers convened a *Beis Din* and judged him according to *Halachah*. They judged him as a *rodef* - pursuer, one who chases another with the intention to kill him. The *Halachah* is clear in this case. The verdict was based upon the principle that the pursuer is liable for death, as long as there is no other way to save the pursued. The *Sforno* writes that the brothers were so clear in their judgement that they experienced no pangs of remorse. In fact, after they threw Yosef into the pit, they sat down to eat. They perceived their actions as neither wrong nor tragic. They did what the situation demanded of them!

Even twenty two years later, upon witnessing their father's continued anguish over his loss, they still did not question their deed. When Yosef was prepared to imprison one of the brothers, they conceded among themselves that perhaps they were being punished for not taking pity on Yosef when he pleaded with them. At no time, however, did they change their opinion regarding their original verdict. They still felt that Yosef's actions merited the death penalty. Indeed, the judgement was so unambiguous that when Yosef revealed himself to them, the brothers were prepared to kill him had not an angel intervened. (*Tanchuma*)

The *Alter of Kelm, z.l.*, suggests that this episode communicates an important insight into human nature. When one has a first impression of a given situation, it becomes rooted in his subconscious. This conception will gradually become a part of his psyche, so that his mindset is reconstructed in accordance with his initial assessment. Even if the original matter has been forgotten, he will nonetheless conform to his original decision. The verdict that Yosef deserved death was so ingrained in the brothers' nature that, even though they were prepared to ransom him and bring him home immediately upon recognizing him, they acceded to their natural instinct and desired to kill him. That first impression still clouded their ability to judge clearly. How careful must one be when passing judgement on a matter upon which he has previously developed a strong opinion. Unless one can completely absolve himself of all previous notions, he cannot offer a pure critique, since he is subconsciously hindered by his earlier prejudice.